FUNNY MONEY (ESPÈCES MENACÉES)

by Ray Cooney
Melbourne French Theatre
Directed by Noel Anderson
Reviewed by Bruce Cochrane – September 5, 2013

British theatre identity Ray Cooney is famous for a string of farces and comedies written for stage and screen and this French adaptation of his 1994 farce continues the tradition of complications, cover-ups and confusion. At the outset the pace was slow, partly because Marie (Margherita Ghisi) had little to do but strike exaggerated poses. When joined by Stephane Larkin-Verite as her husband Yvon, they proceeded to converse slowly with many pauses and little or no eye contact until MFT

(l–r) Stéphane Larkin-Vérité, Giovanni Piccolo, Margherita Ghisi, Charlotte Pradeilles, Marc Buret and Michael Bula in Melbourne French Theatre's Funny Money (Espèces Menacées). *Photo by Michael Lean.*

powerhouse Michael Bula made a grand entrance as Roussilon, a bent police inspector with a range of cartoon gestures and reactions. To attempt a description of the plot would be like trying to explain The Meaning of Life but there is a lot of potential for laughs here which ultimately depends on acting style. Among a talented cast of eight there were some entertaining moments as actors went in and out of doors with Yvon attempting to push an impossible agenda. The further the play went the better the pace became, except that a couple of actors continued to stand front-on and talk to the audience. With the arrival of dinner guests Sylvie and husband Jacques, Marie (Margherita) became more involved until she started to show the effects of too many drinks. She did this well but overplayed the flirting with taxi driver Louis (Giovanni Piccolo), who sustained his character while suffering endless mixed messages and delays from Yvon. As a nerdish accountant discovering someone else's fortune in a briefcase identical to his own, Stephane looked the part and produced some amusing expressions of anxiety, exasperation and despair. As Jacques, Marc Buret displayed droll resignation at the absurdity of his friend Yvon and, combining well with his wife Sylvie (Charlotte Pradeilles), provided balance as the chaotic events unfolded. Marc is a master of 'less is more' acting and comes across well as an 'Everyman' character when performing with ludicrous plot and dialogue, while Charlotte's sophisticated style of acting offered another ingredient to the manic activities. Both Charlotte and Marc played to the other characters on stage and, more importantly, listened to them, which are basic necessities of acting.

The appearance of Eddie Fatha as Renard, another detective, seemed to be one policeman too many as he was continually sent to wait outside or in an adjoining room so that Eddie's performance was interrupted. Finally, the late arrival of a masked intruder with 'a gun to go' was well played by Bertrand Cauvin but, like Renard, was really an extraneous character.

The script makes serious demands for a set design which accommodates different rooms and a lot of doors and Fiona McKeon accomplished this by creating an open-plan space and separate areas upstage left and right on rostrums. Unfortunately, the characters waiting on rostrums distracted from the main action at times with unnecessary activity including 'silent' but animated conversation which is confusing for an audience.

Fiona had chosen well with costumes ensuring some style and elegance where appropriate, particularly the women's dresses and men's suits. Greg Abendroth, working with little scope, did manage to add a few colourful features to his lighting design including a pleasant crimson hue on the cyc screen and some well-lit small lamps.

Most of the action was well placed downstage, projection was good and there were some nice touches such as the synchronised movement of the quartet of cognac drinkers swishing their brandy balloons and the final scene of bent-over embraces.

Once again MFT produced an attractive and informative programme (by Caitlin O'Neill) and evidence of the strong support of their many sponsors.