

## IS THREE REALLY A CROWD? (LE PLUS HEUREUX DES TROIS)

by Eugene Labiche  
Melbourne French Theatre  
Directed by Alec Gilbert  
Reviewed by Bruce Cochrane – May 9, 2015

It's always pleasing to see a capacity audience, better still one that contains a large proportion of young people and above all an audience who is engaged by the performance.

So the return of Melbourne French Theatre to Open Stage in Carlton made for a successful beginning in their 87<sup>th</sup> production with this 19<sup>th</sup>-Century play updated to modern times.

If the playing style was slightly uneven there was no lack of energy in the presentation of yet another old-fashioned French farce. As always the story doesn't bear close examination and the characters are mostly 'cardboard cut-outs,' but in a cast of eight there were some entertaining performances and sufficient pace to overcome what was an unlikely scenario.

With the usual undercover affairs providing the *raison d'être* for the husband/wife deception, others are soon drawn into the intrigue and embarrassment that follows. This is very much an ensemble piece in which everyone has their time in the spotlight, with some more successful than others in striking the right note for comedy/farce. In a colourful characterisation of a domestic help person, Henry Mera showed his experience and talent for making the most of quirky expressions and reactions moving comfortably between eccentric and droll, and demonstrating his facility with French and German. As his wife, Sarah Gospodarczyk was suitably restrained but displayed charm where appropriate. These two were 'innocents abroad' in the world of the *nouveau riche* but proved to possess more than their share of shrewdness.

There was something of an imbalance in acting styles with Paul Soyez as the pompous husband apparently unaware of his wife's dalliance with his friend Ernest, played by a very young-looking Stanislas de Lachapelle. These two appeared to have been directed to use volume for expression, with Paul shouting at anyone in sight and pacing back and forth while Stanislas was equally unable to interact directly with other characters at times.

Although the acting style for plays written in these times and earlier called for a lot of asides to the audience, it became 'de rigueur' for several of the characters in this production. The problem then for an audience is that we lose some of the insight into what passes between people on stage as the 'fourth wall' concept disappears. When not being shouted at by her husband, Laurette Peruzzi showed poise and sophistication, although she could have been accused of being a 'cradle snatcher' since the young Ernest appeared more like a son.

This was originally written as a three-act play and the decision to retain that structure led to a long first half of about ninety minutes, which offered few laughs. One bright spot was the occasional appearance of Emily-Rose Guarnuccio as a young cousin who, in

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*(l-r) Larette Peruzzi and Paul Soyez in Melbourne French Theatre Company's Is Three Really a Crowd? Photo by Jean-Philippe Heon.*

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chauvinistic male company, had little say in her future. Undaunted by this script limitation, Emily-Rose's personality shone whenever she entered and engaged with another character. Likewise, Julien Bouissiere presented as an appealing person with nothing of substance to say except for some pleasant homilies, and Hanna Ouahmane as a maid bookended the show with a bemused approach while offering narrative to the audience.

So, as entertainment, we were left with style over substance and it was only in the second half of around thirty minutes that things clicked into place and we saw what might have been.

Congratulations to the audience who were supportive of the actors and appreciative of the opportunity to hear the French language delivered in a clear and melodic fashion.