

LIFE × 3 (TROIS VERSION DE LA VIE)

by Yasmina Reva

Melbourne French Theatre

Directed by Chris Hosking

Reviewed by Alan Dilnot – September 3, 2016

Life × 3 is a play in which the theatre of the absurd is spliced with farce and borrows something from sitcom. It is essentially one play in three versions, the differences between the three being superficially minimal but nevertheless productive of diverging outcomes that betoken not so much modified situations as changes of outlook. One of the clever things about the play is that the characters are constantly themselves throughout the three versions and yet react upon each other in subtly varied ways. We thus are given the impression that, although our lives are bounded by the time and space in which we are placed, we choose how we act within those bounds. A play that refers to these philosophical issues could fall like a dead weight on the audience, and it needs not to take it itself too seriously. Fortunately, in this production these ideas, constituting an intellectual football to be kicked about by the two male characters, were presented as froth and bubble emerging from their egos.

The first act generated the most laughter. Henri (Ruy Buchholz) and Sonia (Charlotte Grasset) are in a continuing dispute about how best to get their young son (whose voice is heard from off stage) to go to sleep. Into this minor domestic tiff enter Hubert (Fabrice Chatain) and his wife, Inès (Candice Blondeau), who have come to dinner on the day and time appointed, but one day too soon for Henri and Sonia whose mental calendars are at fault. There is no food prepared for dinner, though there is a good supply of wine. Sonia is still in her dressing gown, Henri is in shirtsleeves, whereas Hubert is in smart jacket and tie, and Inès is stylishly coiffed and fashionably dressed and shod, though inordinately worried about a ladder in her stocking. All the while, the child wails or complains from the nursery and this punctuates the verbal competitiveness going on in the sitting room. Hubert, who is Henri's superior at their research institution, dismisses the chances of publication of a paper that Henri has just completed, Henri having published nothing for three years. At the same time Hubert scoffs at any contributions that Inès makes to the conversation. Sonia, who at the outset is critical of Henri's efforts as a father, now tries hard to win for him Hubert's good opinion, which Hubert sees as an opportunity to plan a conquest of Sonia. There are some modifications to the motivations and self-estimates of the four characters in the second and third acts, but none of them ever engages the sympathy of the audience to any degree, except perhaps Henri, who at least shows concern for his son, and who is naïve rather than selfish.

These are well-defined characters, with just a touch of caricature in the cases of Hubert and Inès, and they are each beautifully played with that dead-pan assurance which works especially well in comedy. Fabrice Chatain played Hubert with suitable self-important arrogance and shameless sexual opportunism, but he was able to suggest in one of the plays that he was not putting down Henri but was actually trying to help him. Ruy Buchholz's Henri was at first dominated by Sonia and in awe of Hubert, but emerged latterly as one who could face set-backs with nonchalance. Candice Blondeau played Inès with glamour and polish and was far from crumpling before her husband's attempted dominance. Charlotte Grasset's Sonia showed the greatest adaptability to changing circumstances, and the widest range of tones.

Chris Hosking, as director, ensured that the play moved at a cracking pace, and he made the most of the tight confines of the playing area. The set was simply furnished but adequate. My only criticism is that Henri and Sonia were always off stage when Hubert and Inès arrived; having rung the door-bell they had to let

themselves in to an empty sitting-room. Perhaps that was as directed by the playwright. Or perhaps French etiquette is different from Australian. Je ne sais pas.

The subtitles offered a pretty full rendering of the French as far as I was able to judge and they were operated efficiently: without them we couldn't have enjoyed the play nearly as much as we did. And we thank MFT too for the complimentary wine and cheese.