

# reviews



(l-r) Heidi Bula, Jennifer Brigant, Michael Bula, Richard Ryan, Lila Girod and Barnabé Brokensha in Melbourne French Theatre Company's *La Comtesse Bis*. Photo by Jean-Philippe Héon.

## LA COMTESSE BIS

By Molière

Melbourne French Theatre

Adapted and directed by Rosa Campagnaro

Reviewed by David Small – May 5, 2017

*The Countess of Escarbagnas* is a Molière comedy commissioned by King Louis XIV to celebrate the re-marriage of his brother with a princess of Bavaria, and was acted before the Court in December 1671. 346 years later it was performed in a Collingwood school theatre to, among others, lots of French students from near and far.

The colourful programme tells us that the play gives us a good picture of the provincial thoughts, manners, and habits of 17<sup>th</sup>-Century France, and the fact that it was never printed during Molière's lifetime might explain the topsy-turvy nature of this and other of Molière's plays.

The eponymous lady character naturally dominates most of the scenes. Those who surround her are either careless servants or dubious suitors, but most, including her ladyship, put on a different face when they perform a play: *La Critique de L'Ecole de femmes* (*The Critique of the School of Women*) written by Le Vicompte.

Much of the entirely French dialogue is served up at such a pace that it is somewhat difficult to keep up with the surtitles, expertly screened on both sides of the acting area but mostly in rather skinny fonts.

Jennifer Brigant plays the Comtesse with flare and elegant gestures that suggest she had recently refined herself in Paris. She, and most of the other seven actors, ultimately play two roles, and when the household receives scripts to perform *L'Ecole de femmes* she receives the role of a housemaid and obviously plays it from having observed her own wily staff.

NIDA-trained Barnabé Brokensha was Le Vicompte, the young author of *L'Ecole de femmes* and a suitor to Julie, played by pretty Heidi Bula (with a touch of Renee Zellweger).

The big, blustering civic councillor M. Tibaudier, a suitor to the Comtesse and minstrel in *L'Ecole*, was bluster-full Richard Ryan, who began learning French inspired by the actress Catherine Deneuve.

Well qualified, Henry Méra appeared late in the piece as a Tax Collector and yet another suitor to the Comtesse. Michael Bula, as M. Bobinet, the black-gowned private tutor to Madame, held his character well, even when in repose.

Lila Girod was excellent in her dual roles: the gormless maid to the Comtesse who morphs into the delightful Elise in the play within the play. Geoffrey Denans is the rarely seen as the Comtesse's Valet and, as her son.

Rosa Campagnaro must have directed with a barre de fer, as the players played with confidence in their roles and the whole flowed at a steady pace.

Many MFT members had obviously worked hard for the short (five-performance) season, including Eloise Kent, credited with costumes, assisted by Charlotte Kuzniak and Chloe Paul who deserve congratulations for the splendid wardrobe, complemented by Edelia Guillen's simple but effective set design and the dozens of behind-the-scenes contributors.

It is doubtful that the few sound effects were intended to be set at such a high volume. They were so loud, I feared that Mr Tibaudier's farts may have brought down Collingwood's Town Hall clock-tower.

Je lève mon chapeau. Merci beaucoup, MFT.