

reviews



The cast of Melbourne French Theatre's *Panique Au Ministère*: (l-r) Léonore David, Alexis Renou, Sophie Armstrong, Dominique Croset, Richard Ryan and Anouk Bidot. Photo by Michael Bula.

PANIQUE AU MINISTÈRE (PANIC HITS THE MINISTRY)

by Jean Franco and Guillaume Melanie
Melbourne French Theatre

Directed by Donald McManus

Reviewed by Cate Dowling Trask – May 3, 2019

Melbourne French Theatre is in its forty-second year, in that time having presented more than a hundred French-language productions. To stage a production that is accessible not only to a Francophone audience but also to language learners and non-French speakers, all performances include projected surtitles in English.

The highly successful farcical comedy *Panique au Ministère*, by Jean Franco and Guillaume Melanie, premiered in Paris in 2009. This production has a modified script with a reduced running time and an English translation by Michael and Heidi Bula. The action takes place in Gaby's office, over the months leading up to an election. It is the story of Gabrielle Bellecour (Sophie Armstrong) who is juggling a demanding professional life as Chief of Staff to the blundering Minister for Education, Louis Tesson (Richard Ryan), with her responsibilities as divorced mother to a recalcitrant twenty-year-old daughter, Sara Bellecour (Anouk Bidot), and to her own mother, Cecile Bouquigny (Dominique Croset), who is growing

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old disgracefully. The remaining characters are Minister Tesson's estranged wife Michelle (Leonore David) and the newly appointed Ministry custodian Eric Garcia (Alexis Renou). Gabrielle, or Gaby as she is known, has little respite from her obligations but longs to inject some excitement into her life.

The set, designed by Georgia Sexton and constructed by Phil Holmes with Eltham Little Theatre was functional, comprising usual office furnishings but complete with a chaise lounge. The performance space, a theatrette, had no backstage access, requiring the actors to enter through the auditorium doors; however, the space did provide the audio-visual technology essential to screen the continuous feed of surtitles that followed the action very closely. The surtitling team, comprising Valentin Cartillier and a group of operators, are to be commended for their contribution to the production. Greg Rochlin, the stage manager, undertook sound production. Greg Abendroth's lighting design worked well within the limitations of the venue. It included a follow spot for Ms Armstrong, who regularly "broke the fourth wall" to address the audience directly. Costuming by Safa El Samad supported the characterisations, with Cecile's animal prints and disco metallic outfits portraying the ageing wild-child perfectly. I questioned a character's being disguised in a long blonde wig when the surtitles, at least, described the wig as a bob.

Leonore David as Michelle Tesson, the spurned wife crazed with jealousy, gave an energetic performance. As Louis Teeson, the bumbling Minister for Education, Richard Ryan was ludicrous and lascivious, using physical comedy well. Custodian Eric Garcia, Gaby's secret crush, played by Alexis Renou, was simultaneously awkward and alluring, a man happy to dance like no-one was watching. I found his homeless immigrant back-story an interesting inclusion in the script. Anouk Bidot's Sara truthfully portrayed the behaviours and nonexistent insight of a demanding adolescent,

endlessly complicating Gaby's life. Dominique Croset's Cecile supplied ever more complications; from visiting the Ministry uninvited, to hiding her stash of dope in Gaby's office and appearing either drunk or stoned or both, she stole several scenes. Ms Croset did appear to go off-script occasionally, or at least at the performance I attended the surtitles stopped then raced forward, but her comic delivery never wavered. Her mesmerised facial expression staring at the joint in her hand, having taken a long puff, was riveting. Sophie Armstrong's performance as Gaby was a stand-out in the production. Maintaining her character confidently throughout, her monologues gave Gaby a poignancy and complexity greater than just being the only grown-up in the room.

Donald McManus directed this production, drawing not only on his French language skills but also his professional theatre and clowning experience, to accentuate the physical comedy inherent in the script, enhancing audiences' understanding and enjoyment. In 2020 the company will be presenting *La Candidate* which is the sequel to *Panique Au Ministère*.

Melbourne French Theatre's brief production season of seven performances over four days, including three matinées for students, is a major commitment for all involved. Produced by Michael Bula, a founder of the company, the love of French language and culture was evident on every facet of the production. The front of house hospitality included fine local wines, cider from Normandy and French cheeses. Attending my first ever performance by Melbourne French Theatre was an education, and a most entertaining one.