

reviews



"Elle T'Attend" at Melbourne French Theatre

ELLE T'ATTEND (SHE IS WAITING FOR YOU)

by Florian Zeller

Melbourne French Theatre

Directed by Matthew O'Sullivan

Reviewed by Ken Barnes – 25 August 2009

French writers are adept at drawing out the twists and subtleties in relationships between people and this recent work by Florian Zeller is a good example. It opened in Paris last year and its first performance in the southern hemisphere is by Melbourne's hard working French Theatre. The story is set in Corsica where a family gathers for a regular summer holiday. Daughter Anna arrives with Simon who has left his wife and children to move in with her but who is having second thoughts, leading to awkward moments with Anna and others in the family. Simon announces his intention to go for a morning walk in the mountains but when he fails to return, the tension mounts.

Matthew's set was sparse, consisting of a bed, table and chairs, couch, potted plant and a brightly-lit backdrop. When enhanced by drinks and salads, and with appropriate costuming by Hannah Dixon and Celine Stella, the whole arrangement was appropriate in conveying the sweltering summer atmosphere. The feeling was enhanced by good sound effects, including breaking waves and at one point a helicopter overhead, provided by Elise Gueyne. Lighting by Graeme Anderson was equally well done and I was particularly impressed by the twin-screen surtitles managed by Christophe Carrabin and Veronica Hibbs. The performance moved along at a cracking pace with no obvious hitches, thanks largely to sharp stage management by Keila Lopes and Gillian Carr. Completing this impressive team and drawing the threads together was the experienced production manager Carole Sarasa who also assisted with the French direction.

Casting for the production was first rate, each of the principals performing with distinction. Deborah Morgan was a delightful Anna – spirited and vivacious yet able to draw out the pathos as she struggled to come to terms with Simon's departure. Damien Kenny's portrayal of Simon seemed low-key at the start until one realised the character was meant to be distant and preoccupied. From then on it all made sense! Anna's parents were played by Henry Mera and Jocelyn Watson, both of whom performed well. I thought Jocelyn was perhaps a touch too young to be Anna's mother, however that was a minor distraction. Another impressive performance was that of Veronica Strangio, Anna's feisty sister. Michael Bula made a vignette appearance as the security officer, but was that exaggerated swagger really necessary? The stand-out performance on the night I attended was by Mehdi Khallouk, the brother. His character called for a rational mind and a degree of control in the crisis – qualities that he demonstrated with good stage presence. Moreover the poignant moments with Anna, together with his reading of "Ulysses Return to Ithaca" (an interesting twist by the writer) gave Mehdi further opportunities to show his talent.

In general, the interactions between the principals through rapid-fire dialogue accompanied by mannerisms and nuances of body language formed the lasting impression of this performance. While

the storyline was not particularly complex and the ending predictable (at least to the cynics in the audience), it was the personal interaction and psychological exploration that made the play enjoyable.

The play was staged in the commodious Collingwood College and, in keeping with the company's reputation, patrons were greeted in a most friendly and hospitable manner. The program notes were particularly helpful and well produced. This was another successful production by Melbourne's French Theatre.