

PERFORMANCE REVIEW

# LA SURPRISE DE L'AMOUR [LOVESTRUCK]

*Reviewed by Andrew  
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**Author:** Marivaux

**Director:** Donald Mcmanus

**Theatre Company:** Melbourne French Theatre Inc.

REVIEW

'La Surprise de l'Amour' by Marivaux is presented by Melbourne French Theatre. Congratulations to MFT, as in three years it will be their fiftieth anniversary, and they are already the longest continuously operating French theatre, outside French speaking countries, in the Southern Hemisphere.

This production's title is translated, more evocatively, as 'Lovestruck', rather than the literal, 'The Surprise of Love'. It dates from 1722, so top marks to Marivaux for writing a play that's endured for over three hundred years. A challenge for modern playwrights to aspire to. It's a testament to the universality of the themes and how much we all love a happy ending: three couples end the play in blissful conjoined romance.

The program tells us Theophile Gautier, who, as we all of course know, was a French poet, dramatist, novelist, journalist, art and literary critic, considered this to be Marivaux's finest work (don't worry, I had to Google him too).

MFT is based in Carlton in what appears to be a former Victorian corner store. They make do with a tiny stage, if you could call it that, given it's basically a smallish room with one corner set aside for the actors to perform. They enter from the exterior of the building and from the foyer, so the actors are working under very difficult conditions and top marks to them for making the best of a challenging setting. The seating is all on the one level, so I felt sorry for shorter people in the rear rows.

Naturally all their performances are in French, with surtitles projected on the wall behind and above the actors. They are extremely well done, and so they ought to be, given there are a surtitles Manager, Deputy Manager, Consultant, plus a team of four, making a total of seven people involved. Sadly, for those of us whose French is at a level that requires consistent reading of the surtitles, one's attention is diverted from the actors' physicality and inflection, but what can you do?

Donald McManus, who, from the program appears to live in Atlanta and has a very impressive resume, directed the show well, acknowledging that blocking the moves would have been very



*L-R: Julien Raspail as L  lio, Lucie Sors as the Countess  
Photographer Nick Orloff*



*L-R: Michel Bula as the Baron and V  ronique Duch   as the Countess  
Photographer Nick Orloff*

straightforward, given the tiny performance space.

From the program it appears the role of La comtesse is shared by two actors, Veronique Duchet and Lucie Sors. I saw Lucie, who gave a heartfelt and suitably lovestruck performance, after initially being decidedly unreceptive to an affair of the heart.

Julian Raspail as Lelio, the man who falls for La comtesse, was animated and impressively passionate, but director McManus should have impressed on him a cardinal rule of the stage, 'If there's no reason to move, don't.' He seemed to be in irritating perpetual motion, backwards and forwards in a very narrow arc, given the tiny performing area.

Karim Bouriah-Lopez as Arlequin (the Harlequin to English speakers and those familiar with Commedia dell'arte) gave a slightly jarring performance, lurching from one over-played emotion to another with insufficient transition. The character is certainly written to be larger than life, but somehow Karim didn't manage to capture the required vivacity and despondency sufficiently convincingly.

Nora Charif as Jacqueline, servant of Lelio, was charming and engaging, as was Richard Ryan as Pierre, servant of La comtesse. He played Pierre with just the right enthusiasm and oafish physicality to make us laugh.

Arnaud Ramdoo as Pierrot, the Musicien and Muse, without a speaking role, conveyed all we needed to see through his expressive face and hear through his competent musical skills.

Michel Bula gave a dignified and very convincing portrayal of Le Baron. He's also co-founder of the company, which he must have done at a very young age, as well as the translator of the text, a very impressive undertaking. He has participated in some way in all 109 productions by the company which is an incredible achievement.



Top marks to the actress/reader who was introduced only as Viska (a one word moniker like Madonna or Prince perhaps?). She stepped in at the last moment to replace the ill Paola Villanueva, as Columbine. Viska read beautifully from the script and seemed to manage the moves well too. A tough gig done very well.

I did wonder if the song at the end of the play is in the script. If it's not, I think it would have been better left out, as singing was not a forte of the cast.

The set, a printed country-side backdrop, was very clever and surprisingly effective, given the stringent constraints of the space. Well done Sabrina Tsang, who was aided by two assistants. Same with the lighting, by Greg Abendroth, astonishingly all achieved within the ceiling height of a standard room. Costumes by Victoria Mead, assisted by Leah Fitzgerald-Quinn were all impressive and entirely appropriate, especially Arlequin and Pierrot.

All kudos to MFT for undertaking a centuries old play, with centuries old dialogue translated to make sense for a modern audience of a different culture.