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BWW Review: DON PARTIES ON at Holden Street Theatres

BROADWAYWORLD TV

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Reviewed by Barry Lenny, Thursday 10th November 2016

Red Phoenix Theatre is dedicated to producing only works that have never been performed in Adelaide. Their first production was the highly successful and critically acclaimed performance of Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, for which it is short-listed for a prestigious Adelaide Critics

Circle Award. Their second production is by the prolific Australian playwright, David Williamson, Don Parties On, the sequel to his big hit play, Don's Party.

The federal election on 25th October 1969 saw Don Henderson and his wife Kath hosting a party but, as it becomes clear that the Australian Labor Party is losing, the drinking increases and things degenerate. It is now forty years later on 21st August 2010 and, after a hiatus, Don is hosting another election night party to bring the group together once more. This time, the incumbent Labor Party under Prime Minister Julia Gillard wins a second term in office, although at the end of the play it still appears that the Liberal and National Party coalition is ahead, with the Greens making inroads on both major parties. The group, though, seem little interested in the vote counting, turning the television on briefly, then off again at various times during the evening.

They begin looking back over their lives at their adventures and misadventures, successes and failures. They rake over old coals and reignite both good and bad memories. The play begins with a brief recapitulation of the events of 1969 such that there is no need to have seen the earlier play, and the characters soon become clear.

The premiere of the play in Melbourne drew mixed reactions, critics hating it and audiences loving it. The Sydney Theatre Company did not produce it because of the adverse reviews. Critics seemed particularly bothered by the format of the play, being a series of encounters between couples or groups, with some rather contrived excuses for others to leave the stage, which is a valid criticism, but hardly sufficient to condemn the entire play. Forty years on from Don's Party, Williamson has discovered how to write for women, his cardboard cut-outs of the first play becoming three-dimensional characters in Don Parties On. They are also stronger, more independent women, somewhat of a departure from his dismissal of them in his early plays.

Artistic director, Michael Eustice, directs this production, with a cast of highly experienced actors at his command. He focuses strongly on the characters, their relationships, and the foibles, of which they have many. The shortcomings in the play are overcome by the value that he gives to the content. The Baby Boomers have grown up and, as they evaluate their lives, they begin to question everything, and long kept secrets are revealed.

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Red Phoenix Theatre Inc.
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Don and Kath are played by Wayne Anthony and Julie Quick, stalwarts of the Adelaide theatre scene, with countless roles to their credit. They are superb as the mismatched couple, establishing a strong rapport that, as in the earlier play, leaves us wondering why on earth they stayed together.

Their two year old baby in the earlier play, Richard, is now a highly successful forty-two year old, and father to Belle, a teenaged schoolgirl. **Brant Eustice** and Kate van der Horst play Don's son and granddaughter, both bringing a wealth of experience to the play and successfully building characters that enable us to accept their reactions to the various sources of conflict that arise.

Richard is going through a mid-life crisis and has left his wife to be with a younger and more attractive woman, Roberta, played by Jessica Carroll, whose interpretation of Roberta fully lives up to Don and Kath's premonition that she is an attention-seeker, and possibly mentally unstable. She does this through some sudden mood swings and overreactions.

Adrian Barnes plays Mal, now divorced, living simply, and more than happy to drink Don's expensive wines. He still appears to lust after every woman that he sees, even making inappropriate comments about, and to Belle. Barnes shows us a dirty old man, still sadly going through the motions of his past ways.

Lyn Wilson is his ex-wife, Jenny, who rose to be a state Labor MP and whom Mal invites to the party, to the consternation of his hosts. The reunion is acrimonious, and truths are told. **Wilson** is marvellous as the woman who discovered her inner strength and forged a new and successful life without Mal.

Brian Godfrey is the sex mad Grainger Cooley, now suffering emphysema and staying close to his oxygen bottle, while his still attractive, much better half, Helen, is played by **Victoria Morgan**. Cooley now votes Liberal, but that causes little conflict compared to what would have happened forty years before, had he made such an announcement. Time has not been kind to him and Godfrey is sympathetic to his characterisation of the aging stud. Morgan gives her character strength and self-confidence, caring for Cooley, but keeping him in line at the same time.

The two level set is very effective, and is well-served by **Richard Parkhill's** subtle lighting design. With all of these fine performances and Michael Eustice's careful direction this is a good successor to Titus Andronicus and leaves us anticipating more excellent work from this company in 2017.

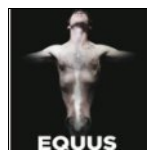
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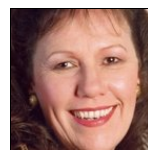
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