

Don Parties On



By David Williamson. Red Phoenix Theatre. Holden Street Theatres. 10-19 November, 2016.

The timing of director Michael Eustice in premiering *Don Parties On* in South Australia could not have been better planned. Quite apart from recent events in the United States that you may have heard about, the home-grown political scenario depicted on stage has a particular resonance these days that only the passage of time was capable of creating.

The differences to be found between this play and its predecessor (*Don's Party*, if you didn't know) are generally neither improvements nor shortfalls, but rather reasonable

trade-offs that fairly reflect the changes that have inevitably occurred between 1969 and 2010. While not building up the same head of down-and-dirty steam as the original, this does not make it a lesser achievement, merely a sign of the times - and of Don's advancing years.

The melancholic and wistful elements are skilfully handled to keep the play firmly in the realm of a human comedy, while managing to remain satisfyingly dramatic on occasion. The issue of 'first-world problems' is touched on without the need for simplistic denunciations. While Williamson tends to cover the expected topics here - politically speaking - they are mostly matters that deserve to be re-examined and re-emphasised on a regular basis.

Wayne Anthony tends to make Don a tad too mumbly/grumbly in the beginning, but his performance gradually accumulates levels of intrigue and becomes quite compelling by the second act. Julie Quick (as wife Kath) is unfailingly charismatic and engaging from the word "go". Don & Kath's grown son Richard is played by Brant Eustice, who expertly conveys the flaws of the man without in any way reducing him to either a villain or a victim. Especially in Act Two, Anthony, Quick, & Eustice portray their immediate family dynamics with tremendous empathy and credibility.



Mal is back in the fold - the charming rogue with a glint in the eye - and he's played wonderfully by Adrian Barnes, who beautifully captures the romantic dimensions of an ageing Lothario (assisted by the playwright's convincing vernacular); it's a consummate portrayal. Ex-wife Jenny is superbly delineated and forcefully delivered by Lyn Wilson, who deftly avoids going over-the-top, and in this reviewer's opinion, easily matches the award-winning film portrayal of the character by Pat Bishop.

Brían Godfrey makes the one and only Grainger Cooley as riotously comic as he should be; the hijinks may be on the broad side, but they get the laughs going, while staying just on the right side of silliness. His performance basically sums up what most *Don's Party* fans would have expected - and probably wanted - for the character: a man still determined to have fun, but most definitely paying for the privilege. Victoria Morgan plays Cooley's admirably stoic partner Helen with a bright, pleasing freshness.



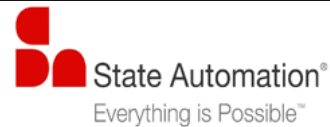
Kate van der Horst's young Belle (resentful daughter of Richard) is variously sharp, scattered, and sceptical, with the actress and Williamson combining to give an authentic feel to her lines illustrating the typical concerns of intelligent, self-absorbed teens. Jessica Carroll's late appearance as Richard's young lover Roberta is a sheer delight, but a poignant one too. Her depiction of a passionate and volatile individual is credible, tragic, and funny, all at once - though it is unfortunate that a crucial climactic event involving her character is staged in a disappointingly clumsy, unconvincing manner.

David Williamson's people, their language, and their concerns all occasionally feel overfamiliar, and there are times when the writing walks a fine line between legitimate nostalgia for a specific time period and superficial, self-referential nostalgia for a fondly-remembered stage play. Ultimately, there is enough freshness, intelligence, humour, and truth here to easily justify the existence of *Don Parties On*. It may not land in the top tier of Williamson's achievements, but it's certainly not just a lazy cash-in on the memory of a classic; it's a winner in its own right.

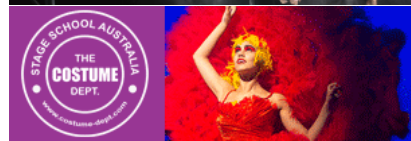
Anthony Vawser

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