

South Sydney Herald

Le Petit Theatre's production of an innovative version of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* cleverly underlines the relevance of the original play to our own times. By juxtaposing key scenes from the original text with a contemporary version in modern language and technological context, the performance highlights the importance of commonality over difference.

Staged in 411 BCE, the play was originally intended as appeal for an end to the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. It is unlikely that Aristophanes had a particular interest in promoting gender equality, but his choice of plot device, the calling of 'coital lockout' imposed by the women of Athens and Sparta until their husbands end the war makes for both bawdy comedy and astute observation on women's place in a male-dominated society.

While it may seem that the women of the global society have achieved an independence unimaginable within the patriarchal society of late fifth century Greece, nevertheless the women of Version B have legitimate grievances. They feel that modern males maintain financial dominance by the refusal of equal pay, and keep the women tied to the domestic sphere by not taking a share of the housework.

The cool-headed and courageous Lysistrata A (Françoise Michel), an Athenian, appropriately dressed in ice blue, and the global city-dweller, the passionate Lysistrata B (Omray Kupeli) in red, instigate the lockout believing that the denial of sexual pleasure will bring compliance. The strike, we are made aware, is as much a sacrifice of pleasure for the women as it a deprivation of pleasure for the men.

A very funny opening song listing the many, many colloquialisms expressive of female erotic enjoyment leaves the audience in no doubt that the women value (marital) sex. Their lusty song comes to an end with the entry of the men whose short choral contribution makes the difference between male and female attitudes to sexual experience clear, while at the same time showing mutual need.

In both versions the rebelling women, who have locked themselves in buildings, the citadel/the mobile tower, housing the source of economic power in each society, offer flimsy excuses to sneak home. A particularly ingenious scene in Version B makes use of the mobile and back projection to show us how the desperate men makes equally silly excuses to gain access to their wives.

So how can both the struggle for power, in war and between gender, be resolved? From the outset we see that Lysistrata is keen to have the support of Lampito (Elisa Tran-Dinh in both versions), a Spartan woman in A and a countrywoman in B, as her success depends on the universality of her campaign. Bravely Lysistrata A puts forward the view that Athens and Sparta share a common heritage and culture, and as they have previously helped each other they are in each other's debt. Lysistrata B argues that best practice must be 'best' for everyone, whether in the business or domestic sphere.

The women's campaign is in its way, a distinctly female campaign as when challenged by the criticism that she knows nothing about the economy. Lysistrata A replies, that she knows how to run a household (a timely reminder that the word 'economy' is derived from the Greek meaning 'household management'). When the Greek women attack the men it is with celery and leeks, and their modern counterparts know how to run a good campaign with placards and loud hailer (both Nidocés, Tania Essoh Bieules and Sophie Lepowic are formidable). Both the Greek Myrrhine (Olivia Auday) and her counterpart, Lucy Brumont, amuse with deliciously

malicious attempts to arouse and then disappoint their men, and both confidantes of *Lysistrata* (Calonice A, Rosalie Noël and B, Marie Moury) are amusingly devious.

The men (Xavier Barthélemy, Etienne Gauthier, Oliver Lejus, Josef Schneider, Stephane Vérité) are rendered ineffectual and bumbling by the women's rebellion, which makes one suspect that women connive in their own dependence. On the other hand, *Lysistrata* is a comedy, and perhaps Aristophanes' big joke was the unlikelihood of women ever gaining the upper hand over men.

It is, however, a popular choice for performance, and Jahjah's additions have added a new perspective. While maintaining the ribaldry of the original, this lively, rumbustious and thoroughly enjoyable version celebrates the importance of unity. Congratulations must go to the pianist Jason Tremain for providing unity of another kind.

While performed in French there are surtitles in English supplied courtesy of Michael Grainger.

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