



French Frolics

THEATRE

LYSISTRATA



By Aristophanes, Le Petit Theatre Sydney, Erskineville, November 13-17

The original ancient Greek comedy by Aristophanes, was first staged in 411 BC and follows Lysistrata, an Athenian woman who believed that if all the women of Athens worked together, they could end the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta through a coital lockout. The women made a pact and informed their men of its terms: that there would be no sex until they stopped fighting. The contemporary adaptation in French of this story by Le Petit Theatre Sydney directed by Anna Jahjah, allows for the addition of scenes in a modern timeline to produce a feminist twist. Le Petit Theatre Sydney (established 2015) is a new amateur French theatre association dedicated to the promotion of the French language and francophone culture in Australia. This adaptation tells the story in parallel with the classical Greek version (albeit with updated dialogue) intercutting with an analogous contemporary version of the story. Lysistrata (Francoise Michel) becomes a spokesperson for a modern-day feminist group. Withholding sexual privileges becomes a strategy for gender equality. Today, where feminism is more prominent and topical than ever before, this adaptation and extension of the ancient play proves that so little has changed since former times. Women may be still treated as less, but when they bind together, they can be more powerful than you could imagine. They can even stop a war.

While the play has these serious anti-war and gender equality messages underpinning it, it avoids lecturing the audience and instead is very obviously being played for laughs. The ribald dialogue and acting make clear that it is not taking itself too seriously and the mood is designed to entertain, which it definitely succeeds in doing.

Lysistrata is certainly not one for all age groups due to the raunchy level of this comic production. For an amateur production some performers offer real strength at times. Elisa Tran-Dinh plays Lampito in both the modern and ancient timelines showing the parallels between ages. Playing the same character but in different eras takes a lot of skill and she carries it off perfectly. Similarly, Michel captures the ancient Lysistrata from the very start of the play. Michel begins onstage as the first actress we see, opening the play with a seductive song. Her sultry singing along with her graceful actions which began with her lying upstage in a provocative position, are engaging and amusing and set the mood for the whole production.

One of my favourite scenes is next, where the women from both timelines swear an oath using a split stage which cleverly shows how the passing of time does not change things. They say that history does not repeat itself, however the uprising of females in *Lysistrata* closely resembles post-modern feminism and the me-too movement, giving the audience food for thought. In addition, the staging is interesting and engaging. The strength of the script allows the seamless creative choices to flow and is the driving force for the performance. So, the production is still powerful notwithstanding the amateur acting skills.

The play is performed in a simple black box theatre containing a minimalistic set. However, the directorial choices regarding staging and actors' blocking through use of levels creates symbols of status and power. The actors are at the same level as the audience without a raised stage, intensifying their mutual involvement with us. Jahjah successfully uses split stages to illustrate the connections between the ancient and modern scenes. She directs the actors to use levels for variation by using a balcony chair or table, theatrically simple but visually enhancing the

strong portrayal of their power in the scene. The electrifying choreography in the chorus scenes (again a contribution from the classical Greek origins) is particularly engaging. One indelible scene deliberately reminiscent of the Newton-John and Travolta classic "You're the one that I want", uses two lines of actors in a V shape facing each other, one line for the male chorus and the other for the females and a clever parody of that well-known *Grease* moment has the audience in stitches.

The costumes which were designed by the actors are simple yet effectively distinguish between the modern and ancient timelines. The ancients wear toga like costumes that evocatively juxtapose with the jeans and T-shirts and cotemporary work suits worn by the moderns. The vibrant colours make the play aesthetically pleasing and achieve the intended mood of a joyous light-hearted romp giving off cheery waves of happiness.

The main question on everyone's mind is, whether it is worth seeing if you don't speak French? The answer is yes. The projection of surtitles (Michael Grainger) is positioned perfectly centre stage, and while from some angles they are momentarily obstructed by the actors there is still time to read them.

So, with your minds at ease, rest assured that for a 70minute show, this amateur production delivers a message about power, feminism and war in a quick worthwhile burst of hilarity before dinner.

As the French say, Formidable!

Review by Greta Schaffer