

Theatreview

Reviewed by Ruth Allison

20 Sept 2020

Helen Moulder never fails to please. Her audience expect a quality production and they get it every time. This production is no exception and given the restrictions of Alert levels and Lockdowns, the fact that it continued to be rehearsed and performed is credit to all involved. Planning and rehearsals were done online through Zoom meetings, Helen rehearsing in Nelson and Sue directing from Brisbane, the collaboration a sign of the times. Brava.

Five characters inhabit the stage: Olivia, the CEO of Patterson's Meats; Harry, her father; Jennifer, her sister; Lexi, her daughter and Grace, Olivia's 11-year-old self. They are all played with deft and accurate rendering of gesture and voice by Helen Moulder. She holds all characters in the palm of her hand, flawlessly adapting to each presence. In Grace she excels: a finely drawn, sensitive and utterly disarming child. Seamless clothing changes in front of the audience, adept lighting and music adjustments complement each personality, and the narrative sustains a steady pace.

Olivia is a strong female presence: intelligent, confident, in control, knowledgeable but holding back from those closest to her. I'm not going to say what she is holding back. All will be revealed and the audience delight in speculating. In fact, the audience delight in taking part, such is the intimacy of the theatre space and the social distancing required.

The script is clever and most definitely a New Zealand one. References to meat, farming, methane gases, Pukekos, chickpeas, vegans and trade with China make the fabric of the play. Pathos and humour abound as Olivia struggles to communicate with her father, sister and daughter. In the character of Lexi performing stand-up comedy, she combines both with unforeseen and startling results. Olivia begins to unravel.

A mangled bicycle, stage left, remains the most compelling of props and although little mention of it is made until halfway through the performance, it intrigues and conspires to keep the audience guessing. So does the 'fake news' food item that put Patterson's Meat in jeopardy. I'm not going to give that away if I can help it either. But I will say it was Olivia's sister, Jennifer, the petulant and rather selfish art gallery owner, who endangered both the business and her sister.

Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' and 'Spring' Sonatas – in a recording by local musicians Juliet Ayre (violin) and Richard Mapp (piano) – provides an emotional kaleidoscope. 'Kreutzer' is full of anguish and melancholy and notable for its technical difficulty; in the hands of these two accomplished musicians, a rich and elegant performance. The 'Spring', lyrical and uplifting, is a harbinger of good times because, in the end, for the characters, there is harmony and acceptance, love and the promise of a contented future.

Food for thought in funny family drama with genuine heart

Skara Bohny Nelson Mail Jul 27 2020

Mixing family and business can be a fraught thing, something that Helen Moulder's performance in her current play explores with great humour.

The Bicycle and the Butcher's Daughter is a one-woman play following five people connected by blood, business, and biking, with very different ways of seeing the world.

The play stars Helen Moulder as every character, and her skill and authenticity brings all five of them to life, from the grouchy old patriarch unconvinced by more modern business ideas through to the firebrand vegan granddaughter who “hates carnists”.

An unsung sixth character takes the form of a prop: the bike that takes up a decent chunk of the stage, a sort of negative space that draws attention to absence more than to its own presence.

Absence is very much a presence in this play – the forced absence of the patriarch, too ill to continue his business; the absence of a workaholic parent, too caught up in being a CEO to be the mother her daughter needs.

The real heart of the play sneaks up on you in a disarmingly funny first half, which introduces family members who all have distinct personalities but share a certain frenetic energy.

Each member of the family seems caught in their own hurricane: buffeted about by both the winds of fortune and their own drives, either towards their dreams or away from something they can't actually escape – be it the future, their family, or their past.

The play runs for a tight hour and a quarter, and so much is packed in by each character that it moves very quickly.

The jokes are solid, but so is the emotional heart of the play, which the programme encourages the audience to “play detective” to put together from the pieces of the puzzle each character brings to the performance.

Even character and scene changes are built into the performance with musical accompaniment of Beethoven's *Kreutzer* and *Spring Sonatas*, recorded by local musicians Juliet Ayre and Richard Mapp.

The show has just been extended for another two weeks over its original five-week run after a spate of sold-out shows. Keep an eye out for the re-run of her previous show, *Gloria's Handbag*, which Moulder said she's looking to repeat.



THE-NELSON-MAIL

Moulder, co-writer and solo actor of the Bicycle and the Butcher's Daughter.