

*Oleanna* by David Mamet, directed by John Marwick

Butterfly Creek Theatre Troupe, Muritai School Hall, 23-25 June, 30 June and 1-2 July at 8 pm, doors from 7.30 pm

Reviewed by Tanya Piejus

Given the hoo-ha raised this week over Alasdair Thompson's inappropriate comments about 'women's sick problems' once a month, it's apposite that Butterfly Creek Theatre Troupe is performing David Mamet's controversial treatise on old-school male power versus radical feminism.

Mamet's controversial script is based on the real-life case in the US of Anita Hill who alleged her supervisor Clarence Thomas had made provocative and harassing sexual statements while she was a student.

It can be read in two ways: as a teacher who misuses his power and seriously damages a vulnerable student, or as extreme political correctness that ruins the life of someone who only had good intentions. By the end of this production, audience opinion was divided between the two with one commenting that it was a parallel statement of both. This is testament to director John Marwick's skill in delivering a startling two-hander to a modern audience. Mamet wrote the play in the early 1990s and Marwick has avoided the easy option of making it a period piece, instead blurring the lines even more between who is right and who is wrong.

Two-handers are a challenge for any actor and this one is particularly so with its staccato, cut-off dialogue and unrelenting theme. Both Damian Reid as university professor John and Sarah-Rose Burke as his deceptively naïve student Carol carry their roles with assurance and skill, steadily weaving two solidly opposed characters who draw the audience's sympathies back and forth between them.

Reid imbues John with an insufferable academic pomposity that is nevertheless well-meaning. His systematic ruin at the hands of Carol is painful to watch, but you can't help feeling by the end of the piece that he should have known better.

Burke's Carol is on the one hand vulnerable and helpless, and on the other sly and domineering. Her deft portrayal raises as many questions as it answers, as she twists and manipulates John's intentions to her own agenda and that of the sinister 'group' she claims to represent.

The actors work on an intimate 60-seat traverse stage tucked away behind the blacks at Butterfly Creek's usual performance venue, Muritai School Hall. It's a brave and wise choice of staging, bringing the audience uncomfortably close to the one-room setting where all the action takes place. In fact, the final violent act of the play was so close to the front row that it freaked out the audience member closest to it.

This simple setting could be too limiting, but Marwick's expert direction makes good use of the small space and the blocking never feels too static. However, the same can't be said of the lighting design which doesn't vary between scenes and wastes an opportunity to emphasise the shifting timeframe and tone of each.

The other niggle is with the scene changes which are unnecessarily laboured. Presumably, this is to give the two cast members time to change their costumes, but this could have been handled better with simpler variations in wardrobe that wouldn't have the audience resorting to chit chat to fill the gaps. The original music by Ray Dickinson was, however, an appropriate and atmospheric filler with its piano and ticking clock.

But these technical quibbles are very minor in what is otherwise an excellently performed and rendered production of a challenging script which will leave the audience arguing over long after they've left the auditorium.