

An Entertaining Trip

Travels with my Aunt by Giles Havergall, based on the novel by Graham Greene.

Directed by Kathi George and Mark Da Vanzo for Khandallah Arts Theatre.

Cochran Hall, Cashmere Avenue School.

8 pm: 9, 10, 11 & 16, 17, 18 October. Matinee: 2pm Sunday 12 October

Reviewed by John Marwick for the Wellington District Theatre Federation. 10 October 2008

Khandallah Arts Theatre's latest production is *Travels with my Aunt*, Giles Havergall's wonderfully theatrical adaptation of the Graham Greene novel. Greene said it was "the only book I wrote purely for fun" and the play is certainly funny though not always pure.

Henry Pulling is a dahlia-loving retired bank manager whose life changes when, at his mother's cremation, he meets his aunt Augusta for the first time in fifty years. Augusta's life at 74 is the antithesis of Henry's. He is staid; she is anything but. He is careful; she seems carefree. He has led a quiet and moral existence; Aunt Augusta seems to have enjoyed a very bad life with a troop of colourful but far from saintly friends.

Aunt Augusta proceeds to lead Henry well and truly astray. The play moves rapidly from quiet English Southwood, via Paris and the Orient Express to Istanbul, then on to Buenos Aires and Paraguay. En route we meet Augusta's black lover, a Turkish police chief, a young and pregnant American tourist, a fortune teller, and many other characters that Henry would certainly never have come across in Southwood.

In the end Henry has to choose whether to return to his Dahlias and Miss Keane – the woman he once failed to propose to – or to stay in Asunción with Augusta and the smuggling business that she and her Italian fascist émigré husband are running. But by this time Henry has come so far that there's little contest.

Havergall's dramatic adaptation was originally written for four male actors to play all the roles – and sometimes I found myself thinking of the comic opportunities that the directors, Kathi George and Mark Da Vanzo, lost by using a mixed cast of ten.

I was pleased that three actors played Henry: Paul Langham, Peter Clemerson and Matt Todd. This worked especially well when the trio were a unit moving fluidly from one Henry to the next. Maybe even more comic effect could have been brought out by the Henrys occasionally acknowledging each other's efforts.

Cathy Howell as Aunt Augusta has a central role in the play as the shocking old aunt. I thought she owed a little too much to Oscar Wilde's original Aunt Augusta Bracknell. I'd like to see more of her soft and seductive side with relish for her immorally adventurous life and lovers.

Don Quiring shone as Wordsworth, Augusta's black lover, and O'Toole, a CIA agent obsessed with urine. Meredith Dooley gave lovely portrayals of the beautifully

forlorn Miss Keane, Frau Schmidt, the domineering Nazi general's wife, and fourteen year-old Yolanda. The scene between Schmidt and Roger Leslie as a Spanish gentleman trying to escape Europe disguised as a priest was just one of many gems in this entertaining production.

Well-designed set, costumes, props, lighting and sound all contributed to a fast-moving production that dealt well with the challenge of multiple places, people and times.

This is an enjoyable evening of theatre that will develop further in response to appreciative audiences and as the talented cast grow in confidence and pace.