

84 Charing Cross Road by James Roose-Evans from the book by Helene Hanff,
directed by Tabitha Arthur
Stagecraft Theatre, Gryphon Theatre, 22 Ghuznee Street till 20 February
Reviewed by Ewen Coleman on 10 February 2010

By all accounts *84 Charing Cross Road* shouldn't work as a play. It is essentially an adaptation, by James Roose-Evans, of a book of letters covering a period of 20 years from 1949 to 1969, in which Helene Hanff, a New York scriptwriter, requests rare books from bookseller Frank Doel working for Marks and Co at 84 Charing Cross Road, London. Nothing much happens apart from the two reading aloud the letters they write and receive, they never meet - after numerous attempts Hanff finally got to London but Doel had died by that stage and the shop was closed - and as a consequence the actors playing Hanff and Doel never interact, an essential element for most plays to work. But Roose-Evans detailed dramatisation, Tabitha Arthur's excellent direction and perfecting cast and top notch performances from all the actors make this Stagecraft production not only work but engaging and highly entertaining.

Hanff is the quintessential brash, new world American, totally oblivious to the world outside her apartment, let alone across the Atlantic making her sweetly naïve but irritatingly patronising. In the role of Hanff Rachel Burt captures every nuance of the character perfectly, her Brooklyn accent never wavering. What little dramatic tension or moments of variation there is from the tedium of narrating letters she fully exploits with confidence and ease. Her excitement at landing a job writing scripts for a television series in contrast with her disappointment at not having the funds to finance a trip to London for the Queen's Coronation are real and heartfelt. In the shop droll Frank Doel at least has a life outside with his wife and two daughters, but his fastidious fussiness, and dour demeanour never waivers and it is this that John Chalmers captures beautifully in the role of Frank. Yet he also gives an increasingly endearing and humane quality to the character as he slowly loosening the stiff upper-lip formability with Hanff till he finally signs off his letters with " Love Frank ". As the years role by however and the disappointment of increasingly postponed visits from Helene mount up Chalmers becomes progressively weary but in a way that never drops the pace or energy of the production. As Hanff is slowly drawn more and more into the shop seeing it as real in her imagination as her apartment is so to does the audience, becoming involved in the minutiae of their lives, especially Frank's. The play is also a social chronicle from the post war austerity of England to the Beatles and Carnaby Street and adds much needed relief in the letters to the ongoing book references.

The rest of the cast give great support, each of their characters a staff member of the shop. They become like an extended family, secretly writing to Helene behind Frank's back and adding much needed humour to the play. The set, like the direction and acting, has been meticulously put together, the amount of detail given to it quite extraordinary but necessary to give the right ambience and authenticity. Perhaps however the New York apartment blended too well into the bookshop but this is a very minor quibble of what was a great production setting a high standard for this year's Stagecraft productions to follow.