

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie by Muriel Sparks, adapted by Jay Presson Allen
Directed by Leigh Cain
Gryphon Theatre, 22 Ghuznee Street till 15 August 2009
Reviewed by Ewen Coleman on 9 August 2009

Educational institutions have had their fair share of those attempting to buck the trend of conventional teaching methods, probably none more so than Muriel Spark's fictional character of Miss Jean Brodie. Adapted by Jay Presson Allen from Spark's novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, the story of Jean Brodie, a woman "in her prime" teaching in a very conventional girls' school in Edinburgh in the 1930's, is told through the eyes of one of her star pupils, who has become a nun.

The charismatic and engaging Miss Brodie (Trudie White) develops a cohort of impressionable young "gels" around herself who are known as the "Brodie set", and whom Miss Brodie considers the "crème de la crème" of Marcia Blaine School for Girls. Miss Brodie believes she is in the business of putting "old heads on young shoulders" and so no stuffy books on art history and Latin for her classes. Instead she uses life's experiences, mainly her own and often involving assignations with the opposite sex.

While the headmistress Miss Mackay (Deanne Graham) cannot deny that Miss Brodie gets results there is growing disquiet at her teaching methods. Added into the mix are the philandering art teacher Mr Lloyd (Tom Rainbird), a married Roman Catholic with 6 children, who bestows his affections on Miss but is also not averse to dallying with her pupils, and the dapper but dull music teacher Mr Lowther. Miss Brodie is a complex character who is both naive about her own infallibility but manipulative in getting what she wants. Around her are the pupils and teachers aiding and hindering her progress, with one of them, Sandy (Aisha Pachoud), becoming her nemesis.

On a simple yet functional set director Leigh Cain does well to accommodate the many scenes and locations, particularly creative and innovative is the way groups of characters come on in the half-light during scene changes, interacting in character as if they are in the school corridor or play ground, maintaining momentum and creating continuity for the audience. In the title and difficult role of Miss Brodie, Trudy White does well to capture the essence of the character. An earthy character without being motherly, White exudes confidence, her wry smile, smirk even at times, showing she knew that she was always right. Through White's portrayal it was easy to see the sway Miss Brodie had over her "gels". Yet the vulnerability and self doubt that besets Miss Brodie in the end – when she considers what she has done and whether what she has achieved was worth it - also came through.

In complete contrast was the wonderful portrayal of Miss Mackay by Deanne Graham, upright and conventional, harsh even, yet showing a humanity that could easily be lost in playing this character. All the girls of the Brodie set did well with contrasting their characters, Aisha Pachoud in particular as Sandy, who eventually betrays Miss Brodie, capturing well the oscillations between adulthood and childhood. Tom Rainbird's Mr Lloyd perhaps was a little subdued and underplayed, lacking the passion that enflamed Miss Brodie and Sandy but the character's intellect certainly came across. Stephen Fearnley's Mr Lowther was spot on, dithering and totally at sea in trying to cope with Miss Brodie. Ingrid Sage as Sister Helena and Graeme Carruthers, the American journalist through whose interview of Sister Helena we learn about Miss Brodie, do well to maintain the story line in a different time and space but still being part of the play making this a well rounded production of a well structured play.