

Barefoot in the Park, directed by Kelly Clifford for Geelong Rep. Woodbin Theatre, June 29, 2018

Rep's midyear production of Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park* turned out to be something of a classic. Circumstances had combined to make this production the company's third American play in succession, with two of the three written by Neil Simon. But any reservations that Rep's regular audience may have held about theatrical overloading or repetition, were quickly dispersed by the show's laugh-a-minute opening night.

Written, set and first staged in the 1960s, when playwright Neil Simon was in his prime and at his funniest, this 50-year revival brushed up as a delightfully timeless romantic comedy. Even its setting, in a cold February New York apartment, turned out to be fortuitous, with the Woodbin a warm and happy haven inside Geelong's midwinter chill. And in the safe and sure hands of director Kelly Clifford, Simon's sharply-written, deliciously witty lines came to life as a stage rom-com packed with class and laughs. Much of the play's success was down to director Kelly's casting. Her key pairing of Georgia Chara with Ian Nash-Gilchrist as twenty-something newly-weds struggling to settle into a new life in an ancient cheap apartment was inspired. Georgia was exceptional playing Corie, a zany optimist driven by nervous energy to spread the joy she was experiencing; while Ian, as Paul, was gauche, gawky, awed and bewildered as he tried to adjust to life with his high-octane bride while working as a staid and reserved lawyer. Their stage chemistry became evident within minutes of the opening lights as the number and strength of laughs escalated.

And they reached a sparkling, regular laugh-a-minute pattern with the involvement of a second couple, played by a pair of veteran Geelong scene-stealers, in Robyn Birrell and David Mackay. Robyn nicely underplayed Corie's straight-laced mother Ethel, who was delivered into the hands of Victor, the newlywed's irascible, impecunious flirting neighbour, played with lip-smacking relish by David. This quartet was more than ably assisted by Greg Shawcross's wryly sardonic phone serviceman and Steve Howell's wordless, breathless delivery man.

The play's action was smooth and seamless across a cleverly designed set that turned Rep's compact stage into that rickety walk-up apartment including access to its remote roof. And the play's costumes, furniture and fittings were accurate to the extent they became unobtrusive.

In all, this was a near-faultless production of a top-quality piece of theatre staged by a high-quality cast and crew. They presented a sharply-depicted, cleverly-crafted, witty

story of a romance that was both light and easy as well as fast, furious and very funny. Word has it that the play's opening weekend was sold out even before opening night. It now seems inevitable that the rest of the run will follow suit - so it's recommended to book early if you want to experience this cheerful, fulfilling and heartwarming theatrical experience.

Colin Mockett