

Jake's Women directed by Peter Jukes for Geelong Repertory Theatre Company. Woodbin Theatre, February 2, 2018

Creating this play would have been therapeutic for its author, Neil Simon. Written in the 1990s, when his rocky marriage to Diane Lander was floundering, the play's theme of an author's turmoil as his marriage slowly deteriorated is a thinly-disguised autobiographical piece.

But it's by *the* Neil Simon, the man behind *The Odd Couple* and so many other clever, deftly-observed sparkingly-funny insights into modern behaviour. So this play is a long way from a fraught tale of a broken partnership. It's a tightly-written, fast-paced funny/moving tale of a man who has the ability to conjure up selected images of the women in his life and hold conversations with them, sometimes alone, sometimes in multiples, every one revealing the hurt and humour of that transition in all its desperate detail.

For this Rep production, director Peter Jukes created a clever set symbolising the fractured nature of the dialogue while enabling the central character, Jake, to instantly, magically, conjure up his women. This gave the play a film-like quality, with the action uninterrupted by scene changes.

And it put huge pressure on Geoff Gaskill, playing Jake, who was on stage throughout the entire play delivering Simon's super-fast caustic/perceptive Jewish New York dialogue - this time encompassing his own thinking process garnished with wit and occasional anguish.

Geoff did this superbly in a theatrical tour-de-force of rare skill. He gave Jake depth and perception in near-flawless performance of intensity, nuance and power.

This was matched, and occasionally surpassed, by Tina Rettke's portrayal of Maggie, his second and soon to be ex- wife. Tina was at times empathetic and sympathetic, independent, vulnerable and strong - in turn, in place and sometimes all at once - in a beautifully sensitive portrayal of human emotions.

This pair was supported by a well-cast and word-perfect company of manipulated and manipulating women. Some were imaginary, some real and all were engaging in their own way. These were led by Claudia Clark's quirky sister Karen and Melinda Hughes wisecracking awkward analyst Edith, along with (real-life) sisters Hannah and Jess Senftleben who carefully and perceptively played Jake's supportive daughter Molly at different ages.

In the difficult part of first-wife Julie, who had died in a car accident, Lauren Atkin ably moved from confusion to manipulation to accomplishment, while Bernadette Byrne made an excellent job as Jake's real-life real-time girlfriend Sheila, bewildered to be caught up in all of his character confusion.

As a piece of theatre, Rep's Jake's Women was excellent. It appeared undated and timeless - mainly because of its universal theme and the fine quality of its writing. But mostly it offered the chance to experience an extraordinarily intense piece of acting from Geoff Gaskill who understandably appeared wrung out and exhausted when taking his long and appreciative final applause.

Go see Jake's Women, it's highly recommended. Rep's first play for the year is outstanding for its writing, its subject matter - and it's careful, well-thought-out staging. And most certainly for Geoff Gaskill's remarkable performance.

Colin Mockett
Entertainmentgeelong