Written by Thom White
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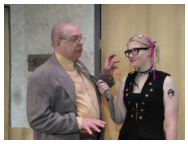
For what it is, the Circa ’21 Dinner Playhouse’s *Nana’s Naughty Knickers* is rather amusing and somewhat unexpected. The title, for me, conjures up images of scantily clad grannies telling off-color, elderly-themed jokes in a wild farce. Instead, playwright Katherine DiSavino’s piece is a *mild* farce, with a unique plot and interesting, likable characters (and only a handful of age-based jokes). I didn’t laugh quite as much as I expected to during Friday’s opening-night performance, but I was more engaged than I anticipated I would be, and interested in where DiSavino would take her characters.

The plot is fairly simple, but centered on a somewhat complex situation. Bridget, a law student, moves in with her Nana, Sylvia, only to discover that her grandmother is illegally selling handmade lingerie to elderly clients out of her Manhattan apartment. Sylvia does this with the help of hidden closets – located here in designer Susie Holgersson’s impressively angular set – that pop out with the pull of a coat-rack handle or the push of a vase. (Although which trigger corresponded to which closet changed throughout Friday’s performance.) There’s also a friendly cop who stops in frequently to check on Sylvia (and becomes a love interest for Bridget), and complicating matters further is the greedy landlord, who is eagerly looking for an excuse to evict Sylvia from her rent-controlled apartment.



The strength of director Jay Berkow’s treatment of DiSavino’s work is his show’s pacing. Never does it feel sluggish or halting as it moves through 90 minutes, plus a 15-minute intermission, with speed. If I didn’t care for one joke, it hardly mattered, because it didn’t take long to get to another line or situation worthy of a chuckle or even a full-on laugh. (DiSavino, though, is reliant on the clichéd joke of one character being hard of hearing and consequently repeating another person’s lines with mixed-up words, which is a little tired, no?)

Adelin Feldman-Schultz’s frantic Bridget helps the pacing, too, *almost* overplaying her part with wild head shakes and nods and large hand gestures appropriate to a wilder farce. Sherry Konjura’s spunky Sylvia – a hip, active grandma – is easy to root for, despite her selling sexy slips to seniors illegally. And Nancy Evans manages to be annoying as Sylvia’s friend without being unlikable; her Vera is that companion with irritating aspects, such as a weird laugh, who is

easily forgiven because she’s such a good friend.

In the show’s supporting roles, the rest of the cast makes sizable impacts in somewhat brief appearances. Konrad Case’s Tom is the sweet-as-apple-pie police officer who seems a little too much of a small-town-sheriff type for the NYPD, but Case is too charming for it to matter. Michael Kennedy is a hoot as Sylvia’s landlord, Mr. Schmidt. I’ve absolutely enjoyed *every* performance of Kennedy’s I’ve seen since his brilliantly hilarious effort in the Curtainbox Theatre Company’s
Glengarry Glen Ross
in 2009, and he’s no less fantastic here, with his mix of Lewis Black-like mannerisms and a sort of edgier-Walter-Matthau style of vocal delivery.

I’m not ashamed to admit, again, how big a fan I am of Cari Downing’s comedic portrayals. As Heather Van Pree, however, she doesn’t employ the unexpected, silly facial expressions and laugh-inducing inflections for which I generally adore her stage work. Instead, Downing plays her black-vinyl-clad purveyor of sex toys fairly straight, with a sincerity in the character that allows Heather’s abnormal normality to be funny without comic embellishments. *Nana’s Naughty Knickers*
marks the first time I’ve seen Lora Adams on stage, but her fully developed, confident socialite Clair has me longing to see more of her acting. And Tristan Layne Tapscott is amusingly unrecognizable as the nasally, dry voice sounding through Sylvia’s intercom system, and entertainingly (though creepily) sexually forward as a dorky UPS man.

The show might be a little funnier if the lingerie worn by the characters were actually risqué, even though the pieces made by costume designer Gregory Hiatt are still impressively designed and made (as I’ve come to expect). Still, Circa ’21’s *Nana’s Naughty Knickers* is a fine entertainment, albeit one that definitely skews toward the older crowd. While I laughed enough to count the evening’s performance as worth seeing, Friday night’s audience members – most of whom were a generation or two ahead of me – seemed to be having a hearty, laugh-out-loud-great time.

For tickets and information, call (309)786-7733 extension 2 or visit Circa21.com .