Murray Bramwell’s Reviews

 Appeared in – The Adelaide Review

Boston Marriage
by David Mamet

State Theatre Company of South Australia
The Space

David Mamet is well-known for the testosterone dialogue of plays like American Buffalo and Glengarry Glen Ross and the intriguingly minimalist expression of his film scripts, so it is interesting to see him venture into the very different world of Boston Marriage, a play he wrote for his wife the actor Rebecca Pidgeon.

A Boston marriage is a late nineteenth term for a partnership of women either living together in companionship or as a lesbian couple. The term arose since such arrangements were seen as a Massachusetts kind of thing and the city of Boston was, indeed, home to a number of influential feminists, writers and intellectuals.

In Mamet’s play, however, we find a much more light-hearted treatment of the idea with Anna (Victoria Longley) and Claire (Rachel Szalay), a pair of fin de siecle operators with late 20th century “me-generation” preoccupations. To pay the bills for her genteel lifestyle Anna has found herself a “male protector” while Claire has become infatuated with a young woman admirer with whom she is madly arranging an assignation in Anna’s own apartment. Complications arise when it transpires that Anna’s Sugar Daddy is the real father of the young woman and, as a result of the scandal, our protagonists look like being turned out of their apartment - much to the chagrin of the Maid (Amber McMahon)

The play aims to be a delectable comedy of manners with Mamet relishing the opportunity for Wildean aphorism and deliberate anachronism. Someone declares they have taken a vow of arrogance, things are described as pear-shaped and after one particularly wordy outburst from Anna, Claire replies “have you taken up journalism?” At times, talented though he is, Mamet’s ambitions exceed him and the quips have the studied complexity of Joe Orton rather than the silky ease of Oscar Wilde and the actors, particularly Victoria Longley struggle occasionally to keep the flow.
Mary Moore’s witty art nouveau set - a curving staircase in pastel green leaf motifs with suitably ostentatious gold trimmings - is ideal for our voguing ladies. As is the trapdoor entrance on the stage floor, allowing Amber McMahon plenty of comic scope as Catherine the maid who engages in a battle of wits with her employer. Anna, for her part, fails either to remember her name or to note that she is Scottish - berating her, as she does, over the cause of the Irish famine. It is nicely silly stuff and McMahon enjoys her opportunities, even perhaps, adding Father Ted’s Mrs Doyle to her schtick.

Director Catherine Fitzgerald has a good sense of the comedy and lets the actors test the full stretch of Mamet’s indulgence. As Anna, Victoria Longley is amusing as she packs her bag ready for her imagined spell in prison while Rachel Szalay’s Claire is generously Chaucerian in her amorous excess. As is David Mamet himself. With Boston Marriage he has taken an unlikely subject and made stylish fun with it. Some of it is clunky but much of it canters very well, as he reminds us that all marriages have their inconveniences - even the Boston variety.