Murray Bramwell’s Reviews

Appeared in - The Adelaide Review

Moonfleet
adapted by Catherine Zimdahl
Windmill Performing Arts and
Mainstreet Theatre Company
Carrick Hill

Windmill Performing Arts has a three year arrangement with the Mt Gambier based Mainstreet Theatre Company and, by the look of their first joint venture, the combination is going to be a happy one. Mainstreet director Teresa Bell has taken an adaptation by playwright Catherine Zimdahl of Moonfleet, J.M.Falkner’s lively story of smugglers, ghosts and true destinies, and turned it into an engaging promenade production.

On tour since the beginning of January, Moonfleet has played to regional audiences at the Umpherston Cave in Mount Gambier, the Old Gaol at Robe, the Foreshore at Kingston and Granite Island at Victor Harbor. For Adelaide performances, the gardens and imposing buildings at Carrick Hill offer settings for this ripping yarn of John Trenchard and his search for treasure and his heart’s desire.

Kathryn Sproul’s serviceable tombstones, crypts and tavern tables provide the focus for our unfolding tale, narrated by young Trenchard, and touching on such matters as the cruelty of Magistrate Maskew, the mystery of Blackbeard, the steadfastness of the smuggler Elzevir Block and the pure heart of Grace Maskew, waiting in the tiny village of Moonfleet for her hero’s return. It is standard Edwardian fare but Catherine Zimdahl’s robust and straightforward script, and the strength of the performances lift it all well beyond predictability.

Ninian Donald is excellent as Trenchard, his physicality and bright delivery capturing the young audience who relish every opportunity to haul on ropes and keep the show a-voyaging. Amber McMahon is charming as Grace and witty in cameos as a peevish aunt and a crooked jeweller. Ken Radley’s stern but fatherly Elzevir is a fine foil to Ninian Donald and Ian Scott not only successfully engages our indignation as the vile Maskew but finds well-nuanced humour as Ratsey.
The story takes us from the forecourt of the house at Carrick Hill, to the espaliered pear grove and across the lawn to the purpose-built prison tower. It is gratifying to see children so engaged by the lucid narrative and the spirited, but never patronising, acting. Director Teresa Bell and the cast have brought freshness and real theatricality to a familiar genre. The promenade elements work smoothly, the players are splendid and the story is well told. With *Moonfleet*, Windmill and Mainstreet have created a little summer treasure of their own.