Why does all the tribulation in Shakespeare’s tragedies hinge on flimsy plot devices like stolen handkerchiefs and misdelivered letters? What if these plays were really meant to be comedies? These are the questions asked by Constance Ledbelly, the central character in Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet), a light-hearted exploration of the women characters in Othello and Romeo and Juliet by Canadian playwright, Ann-Marie McDonald.

Low in status and self-esteem, Constance Ledbelly is a university researcher, bullied by a self-important professor and persisting with unfashionable lines of enquiry about alchemy in Shakespeare’s canon. She believes that there is a missing author in the plays, a Wise Fool who knows their true meaning. And, before you can say Totally Implausible, Constance, like Alice down the rabbit hole, finds herself in a Time Warp straight into Othello’s Cyprus - in time, it seems, to save Desdemona from Iago’s treachery and the Moor from meltdown. After that, it is destination Verona and our unlikely heroine, disguised as a boy, rescues Tybalt and is amorously pursued by both Romeo and Juliet, now trapped in a faltering teenage marriage.

Attentively directed by Kim Durban, the performers in this State Theatre Company production bring their best effort to McDonald’s whimsy. Sally Cooper is endearing as the ditzy but stout-hearted Constance, Margot Fenley is sporting as the now-bloodthirsty Desdemona and Ksenja Logos gently comic as a sex-starved Juliet. As Romeo Justin Moore is amusingly gormless and Michael Habib, is often hilarious as the revised Othello and Juliet’s prurient Nurse.

But with an over-long and dated text tottering with plot convolutions, self-conscious asides, wisecracks, undergraduate parody and needless reams of cod blank verse, the strengths of the performances are often lost.
ters are also not helped by designer Dean Hills who, while providing a pleasingly workable set, burdens the actors with voluminous faux Elizabethan britches and other costume follies which persistently work against the more thoughtful purposes of the play.

Which raises the question - just how serious is the writer with this pastiche Elizabethan verse? The effect is tedious, worse still, it is dramatically disengaging. And what, after all the extruded comic complication, are we to make of the banality of concluding speeches such as “I’ve had it with all that tragic tunnel vision” and “Life is a mess, thank God.” Constance herself should know that the accomplishment of Shakespeare’s plays is to dramatise complexities, not reduce them to the wisdom of a Christmas cracker.