The building on the corner of Angas and Cardwell Streets has been a familiar address for Adelaide’s more intrepid theatre audiences. It was once the home of the Red Shed Company, noted, among other things, for a succession of Daniel Keene premieres. Long before that, it was a venue for Troupe Theatre in its first incarnation. And now, for the past four years, the space has been operating as The Bakehouse, an idea cooked up by its lessee, actor manager Peter Green, who has worked hard with a variety of ventures to keep it active and inventive. With their current production The Bakehouse has announced the formation of Bluetongue Theatre, a professional company looking to create opportunities for local artists.

And in Wit, Margaret Edson’s 1999 Pulitzer winner, they couldn’t have chosen a better text with which to begin. Vivian Bearing is a scholar whose academic life has been devoted to the work of the seventeenth century poet, John Donne. Now diagnosed with stage-four metastatic ovarian cancer and undergoing heroic levels of chemotherapy, she must reconcile medicine and metaphysics, intellectual conceit with the lonely truth of life and death.

Sometimes hampered by the limited confines of the venue and the literal hospital ward requirements of Malachi Aird’s set, director Eddy Knight has done well to keep both the intellectual and emotional narratives lucid and affecting. One of Edson’s ironies is to parallel the precision of Bearing’s textual research with the clinical detachment of the hospital doctors. Peter Green and David Adams, as Kelekian and Posner, are suitably awkward with the human predicament of their subject while Teresa De Gennaro provides nicely judged warmth for Susie, the archetypally sweet-natured nurse.

In the demanding central role, Bridget Walters provides a courageous and touching performance. At times less confident with the tongue throttling demands of Edson’s satirically pedantic bibliographical waffle, she is memorable when it really counts - in the splendid scenes with her mentor EM, played beautifully by Phyllis Burford, in the smartly scripted lectures.
on the Holy Sonnets and in the unsparing, yet understated presentation of Bearing’s decline in the final scenes.

Often plays which use extensive literary sources end up being precious, or exercises in self-regarding cleverness. Margaret Edson’s Wit is not one of those. In its intelligence, subtlety and artful structure it also enables real feeling and insight into that comma - or is it coma? - which separates life and death. In its inaugural work BluetongueTheatre has articulated this in an honest and absorbing production.