Many have noted how often the tragedy in Shakespeare is triggered by the merest foolish thing. If only Desdemona had not dropped that handkerchief, or the Friar’s letter had got safely to Romeo then disaster would have been averted and all would have ended happily. That is the theory that preoccupies Constance Ledbelly, the central character in Canadian writer, Ann-Marie MacDonald’s comedy.

Constance, as her name suggests, is a good person in a nasty world. She is a down-trodden and unappreciated academic, interested in the more esoteric aspects of Shakespeare - particularly in alchemy, and in the idea that there is a Wise Fool missing from the text, one who would preside over the restoration of harmony. As she ponders over the predicaments of Desdemona and Juliet, our reluctant heroine, rather like Alice through the Looking Glass, is herself spun back to a future where she can intercept Iago’s mischief and prevent Moor mayhem and, by preventing the death of Tybalt, open the way for Juliet and Romeo to marry.

This is a whimsical premise and an opportunity to portray new destinies for the women. Desdemona is now a swashbuckling adventuress and Juliet, unfulfilled in teenage marriage, starts looking (as does Romeo) towards Constance herself as an object of desire.

State Theatre director Kim Durban brings together a pleasing cast led by Sally Cooper as the awkward but valiant Constance and Ksenja Logos, amusing as the frazzled fourteen year old Juliet. Margot Fenley is a very forthright Desdemona, Justin Moore is droll as the ghost and feckless as Romeo and Michael Habib succeeds in attracting jeers as the caddish Professor Night and laughs as Juliet’s smutty Nurse.

But with a text which is too long and a plot too convoluted, the ensemble has an uphill task. The allusive in-jokes, asides, and an excess of pastiche blank verse weakens the focus. The effect is urbane comedy one moment and increasingly desperate stage business the next. And despite a useful
set, designer Dean Hills adds to the play’s woes with outlandish parodic Elizabethan pantaloons which mean that not even the play’s thoughtful moments can rise above silliness.

There have been plenty of instances of scripts which use the bard as their subject - Shakespeare in Love, for instance and Stoppard’s masterly Rosen-crantz and Guildenstern. But intertextuality is an essentially parasitic business and there are pitfalls for the writer. Ann-Marie MacDonald is trying to have two bob each way - cosying up to the great plays, getting jokes off them, and then pulling out a reductionist conclusion that tragedy is for defeatists who don’t know how to accentuate the positive. It doesn’t work, and the result is that a light idea becomes a laboured one.