

The Morality of Mrs Dulka

Bear Pit

8-11 July

Set in Krakow in 1906 (the year the play was written) Gabriella Zapolska's play in a translation by Teresa Murjas is a comical satire exploring and exposing the self-righteous hypocrisy of the upper classes. It could easily have been about Britain in 1906 or about the self-righteous hypocrisy of is not extremist Britain politicians in 2026.

The play unmasks the snobbery and hypocrisy of the matriarch, Aniela Dulka, splendidly played by Jacquie Campbell, ruling her husband and children, ultimately the class and political struggle against the establishment, as it were, is not about morality but about money.

The remarkable thing about the collaboration between firstlight theatre and Copernicana CIC productions is not only the highly disciplined acting and stagecraft but also the first class quality of Danny Masewicz's direction and set design.

Because the weather was so hot there were two short intervals rather than the originally intended one. The company had gone to considerable lengths to find a temporary workable air conditioning unit, but the Bear Pit deserves and badly needs a full, complete and permanent air conditioning system.

But back to the production. The play is constructed with a series of short scenes, but this design meant that there were no scene changes and no stoppages. Continuity was achieved by four doorframes. Through the stage right doorframe we could see Mrs Dulka's husband with his back to us and her two very different daughters, Mela (Alice Edwards) and Hesla (Joanna Stevely), often asleep having been banished from Mrs Dulka's domain. Felicjan Dulka, the almost completely silent husband, memorably played by Ash Hayward, has only one powerful line. Behind the central doorway sits in profile perhaps the most interesting character, son Zybseko played by Justin Osborne, who looked wonderful in his stylish suit. In fact all Alicja Trelowska's costumes were beautifully made and lovely to look at. Zybseko, rebelling against his mother by expressing much more liberal views about the equality of people from different classes, also rebels against Mrs Dulka's moral code having made servant Hanka pregnant and threatens to defy his mother by marrying her. It is powerful to see him sitting impassively in his private centre stage space while the women are talking and scheming about what to do with him. The stage left space is Hanka's, her dowdy costume contrasting with the opulent costumes of the powerful women, Mrs Dulka and her niece Juliasiewiczowa (Ania Bhatia) who are the ones to decide the fate of all the men.

However, at the end it is Hanka's godmother, washerwoman Mrs Tadrachowa, (Sheena Ison) who wrests the power by forcing a financial settlement when Zbyseko is prevented from marrying Hanka. The decision to give the godmother a regional English accent (rather than a Polish one) forces the audience to think about their contemporary culture's relationship between class, power, morality and money.

There are also some other fascinating touches. The early contrast between the stillness of Mrs Dulska's restless busy stomping and the stillness of the tenant (Lynda Liddament) introduces the theme of power. Zybesko's ludicrous air playing of the piano establishes his parody of his mother's pretensions and the enigmatic secret of the location of the cigars gets the audience thinking about open secrets.

This is an engrossing play: succinct, splendidly performed and brilliantly directed and designed.