

Mental illness portrayed with sensitivity and insight

SHOW: *Cosi*

DIRECTOR: Scott Sparrow

CAST: Adrian Collins, Andrew Laubscher, Kate Liquorish, Wilhelm van der Walt, Luke Ellenbogen, Roxanne Blaise, Emily Child, Louis Viljoen, Tinarie van Wyk Loots, Deborah Vierya, Guy De Lancey

VENUE: The Little Theatre at UCT's Hiddingh Campus on Orange Street, Cape Town until July 31

REVIEW: Peter Tromp



scene from 'Cosi'

Very often, the challenge in watching actors play characters with mental illnesses lies in determining whether they are actually portraying characters, or rather just mimicking the physical symptoms associated with a particular condition.

It can look very impressive when an actor convincingly does the latter, like Sean Penn in 'I Am Sam,' or Russell Crow in 'A Beautiful Mind,' but the following debate continues in critical circles: were those actors actually doing what an actor is supposed to, namely giving life to a complex character, or were they just giving vent to a bag of tricks meant to sway audiences during awards season?

That is not the case with this production of 'Cosi' by The Mechanicals theatre group. There's nothing cloying, exploitive or overly precious in the universally marvellous cast's evocations of a bunch of mental patients at an Australian mental hospital, who attempt to stage the Mozart opera 'Cosi fan tutte.' For that, everyone involved deserves massive kudos right off the bat.

I remember watching the movie version of 'Cosi' when I was around 20, and loathing the person who made me watch it for sucking me into what I considered at the time to be a populist, feel-good trap of a movie, in the vein of 'Steel Magnolias' or something. The movie has since repaired itself in my mind and I have mostly fond memories of it. This time, I had no trouble falling in love with writer Louis Nowra's world, thanks to the sterling work done by The Mechanicals. This is populist entertainment the way it should be done: with humour, heart and a strong current of intelligence running through it as well.

I'm not exactly sure if this is Scott Sparrow's major theatrical directorial debut, but he does a pretty tremendous job of keeping what is a very busy play on track. For the most part, he gives his cast breathing room to play, and I believe it was the right approach. He is working here with gifted, mostly young actors, who also happen to have an incredibly likeable and relatable air about them as an ensemble, and that is very important in something that, at its core, is supposed to win minds as well as hearts. It is obvious that he trusted them a great deal, and that trust has been justified. There were a few moments where it was a tad difficult to hear what the actors were saying amongst themselves, but these are technical things that can be remedied fairly quickly.

What cannot be learned so quickly is the intuitive understanding that Sparrow clearly has in abundance already.

Perhaps his strongest achievement is the fact that he doesn't overcook things. The humour in particular roles along delightfully, with just enough punch and none of that modern obnoxiousness where one gets the feeling of being winked at the whole time. Nobody seems to think what they are doing is funnier than it is, and it makes all the difference.

The performances are, as I mentioned, almost universally fantastic, but allow me to heap praise on one particular star.

I have felt for a long time that Adrian Collins is one of the best male actors in the city, yet he doesn't seem to get the credit he so richly deserves. Hopefully that will change after his appearances in 'Cosi' and the other Mechanicals show on at the moment, 'Mephisto.'

In the half decade or so I have watched him perform, I have never seen him deliver a bad performance, whatever he has been in. He reminds me of Nick Nolte with his burly physique and his intelligence in the way he uses it.

'Cosi' is spellbinding from start to finish and almost giddily entertaining throughout. It is yet another feather in the cap of The Mechanicals, who at this stage, is surely fast approaching local legendary status.

* Book for all shows on 021 480 7129. For more information, visit www.themechanicals.co.za.