

Distaff Odd Couple loses in translation

By Adrian Chamberlain, Times Colonist
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REVIEW

What: The Odd Couple (female version)

Where: Langham Court Theatre

When: To Oct. 16

Rating: 3 (out of five)

There are many who, after working hard all week, merely want to be entertained at the theatre.

“Let me be entertained,” says the frazzled businesswoman or the exhausted house-hubby. “For I have been toiling mightily and, on my night off, do not want to ponder the social ills of the world.”

For such folk, the Victoria Theatre Guild’s new production of Neil Simon’s *The Odd Couple* might well be a passport to a pleasant evening. This is the female version of Simon’s 1965 comedy. Supposedly acquiescing to public demand, the playwright reworked his romp in 1985, with fussy Felix becoming Florence and slobby Oscar transformed into Olive.

The Guild gang, directed by Sylvia Rhodes, have resurrected the female *Odd Couple* with a good deal of enthusiasm and energy. Husky-voiced newcomer Shelley Superstein seems well cast as Olive. And Christine Karpiak, as Florence, sometimes reveals a gift for physical comedy. Her goose-like honks to clear her sinuses are, quite literally, a hoot.

That said, there are a few problems with the show. The main one is Simon’s script. Flipping genders to rework *The Odd Couple* might have seemed a good idea. And to the playwright’s credit, he did rewrite the dialogue in an attempt to capture female sensibilities, instead of merely changing the names of characters.

Yet something is lost. In the female *Odd Couple*, the original poker game becomes *Trivial Pursuit*. This is no small thing. In the original play, Oscar is a divorced sportswriter who puts the “s” in slovenly. The machismo-saturated arena of the poker game -- accompanied by cigar-smoking, booze and cruddy snacks -- is the pig-pen in which Oscar delightedly wallows.

Playing *Trivial Pursuit* doesn’t quite cut it. Why can’t women play poker? The poker game, so central to *The Odd Couple*’s microcosm of the male world, served to provide a potent foil to the prissiness of Felix. In his new role as Oscar’s roommate, Felix scampered around the apartment disinfecting and cleaning everything. The fundamental contrast between the two men is the engine driving the original play’s comedy. The clash of humours led to, well ... humour.

Certainly, equality of the sexes has made strides since 1985. Yet even in this enlightened day and age, it seems less funny to see a woman (Florence) flitting about cleaning obsessively. Rightly or wrongly, this doesn't seem overly odd. It is, therefore, not overly amusing.

I think Rhodes, as director, might have done more to play up the differences in Florence's and Olive's characters. As Olive, Superstein correctly projects a brash, rough-and-ready character. But we don't really see much evidence of her slobbishness. We need someone who wallows in the mire. Superstein's greatest sin seems to be hanging a baseball uniform on her wall in Act I.

Ditto for Karpiak as Florence. Her character is intended to vacillate between compulsive neatness, hypochondria and ultra-femininity. This could be played up further, both in performance and in costuming.

One plus for the female Odd Couple is the banishment of the unfunny Pigeon sisters, who are replaced by two funnier brothers from Spain: Jesus (Brian Adams) and Manolo (Wayne Yercha). Both actors do well in these parts -- Yercha, in particular, has a certain precision in speech and movement that is welcome.

I confess to not being a big admirer of Simon's humour. It sometimes has a fusty vaudeville flavour that hasn't dated well, particularly in the age of Family Guy, The Office and South Park. Take, for example, this exchange:

"Somebody told me you were seeing a doctor. Is it anything serious?"

"No. We only had two dates."

Did you chuckle? If so, please add a half-star to this review.

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