

An insightful portrayal of the elderly

With everything hinging on script, the actors, and the set, few tasks may seem as daunting as putting up a theatrical production. Overdo it, and you risk creating a grotesque caricature; underdo it and you might as well have attended a wake.

In short, it's a precipice that very few should dare navigate. Every so often, however, one encounters a gem where a measure of ranting and raving cannot be helped: Alfred Buttigieg's production of *Mela Hawn Xi Manikomju?* is just that.

Having myself spent time amongst women of an advanced age who were all boxed and roomed together in various states of decline, I couldn't help but be amazed at how spot on Buttigieg's representations were, and how skillfully he was able to craft the words used to verbalise the crescendo of complaints and obsessions which each character displayed.

Although the play was less than two hours long, I was left impressed by the way he was able to build the various components of each character in such a short space of time. Unlike some of my previous experiences, I wasn't left with that tinny, superficial taste I get so frequently when watching some productions where plots lines are left unexplained and underdeveloped, and characters shallow and lacking in the realism which makes theater-going compelling. Buttigieg's characters were not only complex; they were believable.

The play opens with four women tucked into four beds, all wearing the kind of nightwear so beloved by benign grannies. But, as soon as the lights come on, it becomes extremely apparent that these lovely ladies are anything but tame and quiet. With the entrance of the extremely capable nurse, played by the redoubtable Roberta Briffa, the audience quickly realises that they are not at some retreat for people of advanced age, but are actually witnessing a day in the life of a rehabilitation ward for the old, where Lina, Mena, Gerit and Gużeppla not-so-comfortably reside.

As good as the script was, I don't think anything can top the depth of characterisation which each actress so aptly brought to the table. Despite being just 34 years of age, Lee-N Abela played an old harridan riddled with ageing pain, aggression and slyness with gusto and emotion. It was such a wonder to watch her spitting out obscenities and making demands over everything and everyone in sight that, when I saw her without her stage make-up at the play's book launch, I couldn't quite believe it was the same person I had gaped at a few minutes earlier. The talent on stage that night was truly something special to behold, with each character managing to engage the audience and appeal to them on many a level. Joining Lina in the duel for the attentions of the nonchalant, laidback, nursing aid played by André Mangion was Gerit, played by Theresa Gauci. Gerit was a force to be reckoned with, as she attempted to hog the room entirely with her dementia-brimmed demands which ranged from her insistence that her hair be dried by the staff (although it was not, in fact, wet), to her grief at learning that she had no recollection of her mother's death.

The cacophonous din was further compounded by the marvellous Mena's (Ninette Micallef) insistence that her son would be coming soon to visit her, despite the fact that he hadn't been to see his mother in months, and Gużeppla's (Lilian Pace) deathbed pleas full of loneliness, pain and fear, which truly struck a chord with the audience. Whether it was grief, sadness, happiness, fear, anger, pity or a yo-yoing in between emotions, it was a very skillful rendering of old age woe.

Of course, one can ever write about the excellence of a play without giving a bow in the director's direction. My hat definitely comes off to Tyrone Grima for giving the play such length, breadth and depth.

Despite the fact that the set changed very little throughout the production, with only vivid background images being projected onto discreet screens to show the audience some of the ladies' thoughts, this further added to the unfortunate sense of monotony dominating these women's existence.

And it's an existence which, we are reminded, is brushed under the carpets of a society which seemingly only values the most able-bodied of participants. If it achieves nothing else but being a beautiful moment in the history of Maltese theatre, Buttigieg's play should also serve as a reminder that the old are not simple objects which can be put away, but that they are people worthy of the love, respect and care which many of them have given to their own young.

Anna-Marie Galea, Sunday Times of Malta, March 27, 2016,