

Autumn Music****

69 And Still Going Strong

Bernardo Stella, one of Hampstead's treasures, now retired from his Hampstead institution, the La Gaffe restaurant, has returned this charming piece of theatre and his family history to the menu of offerings on the fringe. And where better than at that other institution, Leonie Scott-Matthews' enduring, intimate and much loved Pentameters theatre, and with her at the helm.

The young bear, Bernardo, remembers his father's itchings at the terrible old age of 69, for a life again, 18 months after becoming widowed. The shock horror element (to his family and friends) of his lusting after a lady from the next village, and the hostility of that village and the lady's family are redolent of the public face of morality of the age, fuelled by tradition and religious rules, but flouted when no-one was looking.

Wittily written, with Stella's infallible ear for the funny, but sometimes awkward truth, director Michael Friend brings his impressive skills to this rich platter of ingredients, providing a repast of highly enjoyable domestic comedy. The play zips along with never a dull moment, and the richly appointed set is beautifully designed and painted by John Dalton.

The main thrust of the story is excellently narrated/performed by the impressively versatile Chris Bearne as Eugenio (bear senior) taking the audience into his confidence and putting them at their ease, while his quandary grows by the day, one might say. The wealth of experience by the cast enabled some amusing doubling of characters and characterisations by Albert Clack and Roger Sansom, but also the simple honesty of all the women in this household. Dot Smith and Linda Bardell showed these redoubtable ladies in true 'period' character, and Zeynep Sandi, as the loving but possessive daughter, Roberta, was movingly loyal in her ambivalence to her father's dalliance.

All that was missing from the story was the observant young bear himself, but in his place the audience was invited to share the delicious Penne at interval, with the enticing smells of its cooking just the thing for stirring up an Italian flavour for the evening.

Saul Reichlin

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