

Stage Whispers review *Fefu and Her Friends*



By Maria Irene Fornes. Joh Hartog Productions. Bakehouse Theatre, Adelaide. 22 Nov – 1 Dec, 2018.

If you seek a theatrical journey that is unusual and ambitious, then this is the show to choose. There is a lot on its mind, and a great deal that it sets out to encompass and communicate to an audience – possibly too much for one play. On the other hand, it may well be a work rich enough to benefit from repeat viewings – but however many

times you choose to see *Fefu and Her Friends*, and regardless of how well you feel you comprehend it, you're unlikely to forget the experience in a hurry.

First staged in 1977, but casting its eye back towards the pre-WWII era of 1935 for its setting, the play sees eight women gradually gathering together in the home of the title character, with the aim of preparing a presentation that will encourage the development of education for females. Performances are strong across the board, each performer working well with the others, while making her role a distinct individual whose various dimensions are deftly displayed and contrasted from scene to scene.

After establishing the central scenario in Act I - during which, this reviewer was fortunate enough to claim a seat actually on the Bakehouse's main stage, providing a rare opportunity to put one's perspective inside the show being performed – audience members are then guided to the first of four smaller areas that each play host to a relatively brief vignette that will give us insights into certain characters and their relations with each other.



Eventually, after interval, we resume our places in (or above) Fefu's living room, whereupon our previous glimpses at each of these eight women in their less-guarded moments aim to accumulate interest in where this group of characters are headed. One potential hurdle for anyone hoping to embrace this play wholeheartedly is that the climactic events, though impactful, also feel cryptic to a degree that will lead some viewers to feel emotionally unfulfilled by the end – though given the themes being explored, this may, in fact, be fully

intentional, and part of the point that the playwright is striving to make.

Fefu and Her Friends sets out to challenge audiences and take them well away from their comfort zone, not by confronting us with unpalatable language or imagery, but by bravely stretching conventional notions of the physical form that theatre can take. Combined with its intriguing take on themes that are as worthy of attention today as they ever were, this makes *Fefu* a production that the adventurous will want to prioritise.

Anthony Vawser