

The Perfectionist mines marriage woes

GREG ELLIOTT | 28 JULY 2015



THEATRE REVIEW | David Williamson is Australia's most prolific playwright and his 1982 play *The Perfectionist* is about a marriage in trouble. The husband, Stuart (Ross Vosvotekas), is immersed in academic work writing his PhD and – being a perfectionist – is difficult to live with. His wife, Barbara (Cheryl Douglas), is

reading a book about open marriage; she has, understandably, never gotten over the several affairs her husband had early in the marriage.

The couple are spending time in Denmark, where males are much more enlightened than in Australia (where men have been trapped in a chauvinistic time-warp – or so it seemed to Williamson when he wrote the story). When Erik (Chris Knight), a sensitive new-age Danish babysitter, is hired to look after their three sons, Barbara is immediately attracted to him as someone who has a very different persona from her husband.

In Act 2, the chauvinist, self-absorbed Stuart attempts to get in touch with his feminine side, spends less time at work and does more child caring. Meanwhile, Barbara has pursued her PhD studies and feels as though she is losing touch with her sons. *The Perfectionist* implies that Stuart is at fault by neglecting his family, but the other characters are not blameless: no one is perfect in this play.



Chris Knight, better-known as a local stand-up comedian, is believable as Erik and serves as an example of why film director Joss Whedon places his faith in comedians in dramatic roles – they can be very convincing as serious actors. Kim York effectively portrays Shirley, Stuart's alcoholic mother, and Rick Mills presents Jack, Stuart's father, as a pushy, successful barrister who never showed enough affection for his sons.

It is very difficult to maintain a long-term relationship of any kind. *The Perfectionist* explores the difficulty of balancing a career and individual pursuits while maintaining a home and raising children; this scenario is a juggling act for any couple and strains are placed on relationships, whether they be economic, social or ideological.

After experiencing the “journey” of the two individuals, Williamson's closing dialogue has the pair agreeing that they can work things out by sharing household duties and being better people. Regardless of its practicality and pragmatism, the resolution seems simplistic, naive and corny.

Director Ross Vosvotekas needs to consider the importance of sound and music in such a show. Just because a

play is set in the '70s doesn't justify loud, invasive '70s songs being played before the opening, during scene changes and during a scene. Music can enhance drama and performance, but in this case the choice of soundtrack interferes with the production.

In *The Perfectionist*, Williamson seems to have created characters who are mouthpieces for ideology rather than real people, so family gatherings become perspectives on pseudo psychology rather than real and raw human interaction. In the interest of "fairness", characters twist and turn and reverse previously stated positions, but the revelations do not feel illuminating or even plausible. Yet regardless of flaws in the dynamic, Williamson writes good one-liners that have you involuntarily laughing out loud, and there are a number of clever gags in this show.

The performances are generally good, with Douglas and Knight having the most sincere moments, but like the play itself, the portrayals are uneven.

Williamson explores relationships, feminism, parenting, careers, sexual attraction, power and gender equality but, in essence, *The Perfectionist* is about a marriage breakdown and everyone blaming everyone else for their predicament. There is the potential for Adapt Enterprise's production to grow during the season and extract even more from the play's characters and scenarios.

Adapt Enterprises is presenting The Perfectionist at the Bakehouse Theatre until August 8.