



MISS JULIE

Sydney

★★★★☆

BELVOIR ST. THEATRE. It's not going to be OK. The realisation dawns early, as a menacing depth charge of music signals the show is about to begin. The housekeeper is warm and humane, the bodyguard is loyal and long-suffering, the kitchen is spotless, but it's not going to be OK.

Simon Stone's bold rewrite of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* takes a text which was shocking when it first appeared, in 1888, and revoices it for the supposedly unshockable audiences of the twenty-first century. The nudity, the sex scenes and brutality are nothing new to anyone who has watched TV in the last week. What is so shocking is how utterly believable these characters and their appalling behaviour become, and how, with hindsight, how grimly inevitable the surprise denouement feels.

Miss Julie is the 16-year-old daughter of a high-profile businessman. Her mother, we find out, committed suicide when her daughter was a baby. Her father is often away from home pursuing a political career, leaving Julie in the care of his house-keeper, Christine, and driver/bodyguard, Jean.

The action begins after Jean has forcibly extracted Julie from a wild party. Still smarting from the humiliation, Julie tries to humiliate Jean back by flirting with him. It is the start of a very dangerous game.

It's dangerous, and it's great fun, at first. Director Leticia Cáceres draws meticulous performances from the three characters, and

the finely observed nuances spark plenty of laughter. Brendan Cowell's Jean is an almost likeable brute, a man of tricky contrasts, who eats with his mouth open but savours the boss's wine like a seasoned sommelier. It's the physical detail that fires the imagination: the slightly gorilla-ish way he walks, the way he sits, the way he grabs his woman. But the words are pitch perfect as well, with an impeccable sense of timing. His self-conscious attempts to speak French surprise us with a sudden vulnerability, the chink in the armour which *Miss Julie* cannot help poking.

Blazey Best, as Christine, accepts her fiancé's rough edges with good humour and a maternal indulgence – the straight man to Cowell's inadvertent buffoonery. With Christine in the room, things just about stay on track. Whenever she leaves, the train crash gathers pace.

As for *Miss Julie*, this beautiful, broken young woman is played to perfection by Taylor Ferguson. Ferguson is a newcomer to the Sydney stage, and she looks all too plausibly sixteen. She has the standard teenage repertoire down pat, from the casual put down to the puppyish enthusiasm. ("You go to church? Really? Can I come...?") Where it gets really scary is when that coquettish little girl begins to enjoy how much power she has over Jean. Not just the power of master over servant, but the power of youth, beauty and raw sex appeal over age and disillusionment. When the three characters collide once more, this time in a sparsely furnished motel room, the descent into disaster is painful to watch but impossible to ignore.

All three characters give extraordinary performances, but it is Ferguson who really rips out your heart. When she takes her bow, dressed in her underwear and a grubby motel dressing gown, she looks so devastated, so exhausted, that you want to reach out and give her a hug.

Simon Stone's adaptation of Strindberg's original is more than just a new translation, but remains closely linked to the old. There is much to admire in his use of language, which mirrors the naturalistic intentions of the original. In a small theatre, without a proscenium arch, the actors are just metres away and their banter feels blunt and real, as if you were overhearing your neighbours. The plot tracks faithfully with Strindberg's original, albeit with twenty-first century updates. The updates are initially entertaining, but soon become an easy part of the new reality.

The most significant interpolation is the gun obviously lodged in Jean's trouser pocket. It becomes a crucial part of Stone's masterly dénouement, which represents the biggest change to Strindberg's original. It's not giving too much away to note how the audience lets out an audible gasp when one of the characters reaches for the gun, lying casually in amongst the discarded clothes under the bed.

We always knew it was going to end badly, but now we know how. All that is left is to watch it happen. **Harriet Cunningham**