

FESTIVAL ANTIGONISH

'a late-summer blast of dramatic fresh air'

Miss Julie: absolutely first-rate

By Ron Foley Macdonald • Halifax Herald • August 17, 2005

Injecting a **strong jolt of classic modern theatre** into their mainstage series, Festival Antigonish has staged a strong new production of Swedish author August Strindberg's realist landmark Miss Julie.

A tense three-character play that explores issues of class and desire in the servant's kitchen of a grand estate on a hot midsummer night, Miss Julie is one of those **enduring pieces** of theatre that seems just as fresh as it did back at its premiere in the late 1880s.

Propelled by some **ferocious acting** from an **outstanding trio of players** (Andrew Musselman, Jeann Priddle and Raquel Duffy in the title role) this particular Miss Julie does have a few odd moments.

David French - the Newfoundland writer of 1949 and *Of The Fields, Lately* - has provided a version of the play that forefronts some of the conflicts, in case they seem to be not obvious enough. And he has updated some of the language to give the text a strangely up-to-date, almost bar room feel. French's tinkering, however, simply can't shake Strindberg's extraordinary creation.

Miss Julie revolves around the transgressive affair between the title character - the daughter of a count - and the count's manservant, Jean. A third character, Kristen, is nominally Jean's intended; she provides some counterpoint to the battling duo in a crucial clutch of scenes.

Strindberg allows Julie and Jean a **full range of emotions**, from anger to despair to full amorous abandon. They dangle the possibility of escape - to buy and run a hotel in Italy's Lake Como - before the return of the Count forces them to come to terms with their impulsive behaviour.

The emotional advantage ebbs and shifts between the the characters, letting them contradict and turn around their previous intentions within the taut 90-minute running time. At times, the play appears to be a battleground of love and hate and everything in between. In some ways, Miss Julie seems more like a Scandanavian Sam Shepard play than something from the late 19th century.

Ultimately, the class system closes down on the characters, sparking a **tragic - and still shocking - conclusion**.

Director Thomason keeps the **pacing tight throughout**, leaving only a few quiet moments for the material to sink in. The play's conclusion, however, seems unnecessarily loose as the paralysis that descends on Miss Julie and Jean gets overly drawn out after the play has reached a climax.

There's much about this production, however, that is **absolutely first-rate**. **Duffy's Miss Julie is a marvel** of arrogance and naivety; she carries herself with the full disdain of an aristocrat who is dabbling dangerously with self-destruction.

Andrew Musselman's Jean catches the practical and ambitious nature of a man attempting to transcend his dirt-poor background. He's certainly not afraid to use his physical attractiveness to propel himself forward.



Andrew Musselman and Raquel Duffy

And Jean Priddle's Kristen captures the stolid resignation of a woman who, on one hand, has accepted her fate in the world, while on the other sees through the illusions of the the transgressive lovers.

Thistle Theatre Design's **marvelous set and lighting** leave the kitchen walls and ceiling partially open, suggesting that this is one part of the estate that is transparent, open and honest.

Denyse Karn's costumes emphasize the difference in the character's class and outlook, making sure that the servant's outfits are indeed uniforms devoid of personal expression. Miss Julie's dresses, conversely, are full of flourish and intimidating formality.

With the action taking place from roughly midnight to dawn, the lighting is **appropriately dreamlike and dusky**. The actors make full use of the available theatrical space, often talking from opposite sides of the stage to delineate the differences between them.

Festival Antigonish's production of Miss Julie is **an illuminating staging of a theatrical classic**. While the story is set over a century ago, its lessons remain universal.

Direct, accessible and strangely contemporary, this Miss Julie is **a late-summer blast of dramatic fresh air** which retains its provocative power.

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