

Play wins arousing round of applause

By: Kevin Prokosh, Winnipeg Free Press



Krista Jackson, Patricia Hunter and Maggie Nagle snap, crackle and virtually pop out of their corsets.

The Victorian era was no time to be a lady.

Women were expected to be weak and helpless, their *raison d'être* only to marry. That they largely outnumbered men in 1885 London meant these unpaired females were considered redundant.

Through five of these spinsters, Toronto playwright Linda Griffiths chronicles the awakening of the feminine consciousness in her randy costume drama *Age of Arousal*. Far from being expendable, this quintet are funny, hot to trot and, with a little prodding, ready to change the world.

Despite being set 125 years in the past, *Age of Arousal* is decidedly modern in how it attempts to reconcile feminist doctrines with traditional marriage and vexing sexual desire.

Griffiths has been absent from local stages for almost two decades and her agile writing, vivid characters and bawdy humour remind Winnipeg audiences what they've been missing.

Victorian society preferred to avoid talking about such a base subject as sex, but through Griffiths' hilarious use of thought-speak -- the actors voice their uncensored thoughts -- Theatre Projects patrons learn that didn't stop its subjects from being obsessed with it.

Mary Barfoot is an aging suffragette who was jailed and brutally force-fed to end hunger strikes. She and her lover and protégé Rhoda Nunn run a school for secretaries. They believe female emancipation will come through typing and shorthand. The destitute Madden sisters, Alice, Virginia and Monica, are new students, intimidated and reluctant to touch their "ferocious" type machines.

"Type, damn you! Type," Rhoda commands them. "It's the way to liberty."

Another kind of liberty arrives in the handsome form of eligible bachelor Everard, an ex-doctor who is also Mary's cousin. He immediately catches the eye of the ripe, young and willing Monica, but becomes drawn to the independent spirit and intelligence of the modern woman represented by Rhoda. He is attuned to the reform in the air and the coming ascendancy of the opposite sex.

"Men aren't afraid of women, really, only of women in groups," observes Everard to a gale of laughter from Thursday's opening night throng.

To her credit, director Ardith Boxall accentuates Arousal's many passions, as does the captivating female cast, outfitted in designer Leanne Foley's elaborate frocks. Each performer fully inhabits her character and exposes the internal doubts and discord hidden away behind the flowery façade of Victorian propriety. As the suffragette icon Mary Barfoot, Patricia Hunter deftly communicates the anxiety that comes from advocating for the freedom of woman but not for her woman. Krista Jackson is impressive as Rhoda Nunn, a conflicted lady tentatively straddling the sexual divide.

Carolyn Gray and Maggie Nagle well play the two old-maid Madden sisters, who feel invisible and of little use to society. Gray's Virginia is a loopy lush who yearns to escape to Berlin where she can smoke, wear men's clothing and look like Oscar Wilde. Nagle's Alice slowly throws off the shackles of her repression and is resurrected by her Remington typewriter. Erin McGrath sizzles as the lusty Monica, whose sisters dine on her unbridled desires.

As Everard, Eric Blais has the most fun, given that he finds himself in compromising situations with three of the women. Blais comes across as a metrosexual in the making.

Griffiths has the last laugh with the parting joke about the inevitability of gender equality in the early 20th century. "In 30 years, it will all be accomplished."

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Age of Arousal
Theatre Projects Manitoba
To March 29 at Rachel Browne Theatre
Tickets: \$15-\$20

Four stars out of five