

# Northumberland Players' Quarter is a fun, fast-paced play

By Northumberland Today



Wednesday, September 27, 2017

The first play of the 41st season of the Northumberland Players is a comedy about decrepitude. *Quartet*, by Ronald Harwood, tells the story of four aged, retired opera singers stashed in a nursing home. They are living out their final days obsessing over sex, doctors and breakfast while trying mightily (and unsuccessfully) to forget their past glories.

Directed by Christopher Worsnop, it's a fast paced and funny look at celebrity, senility, marmalade and erectile dysfunction. Very smart casting allows the audience to relax the moment the lights go up: we know immediately who these people are and while the actors hobble about on canes don't be fooled: this troop can whip out one liners and insults as fast as any cast half their age.

The play opens in the terrace room of a retirement home for destitute musicians. Wilfred, played with an awe-inspiring sense of comic timing by Chris Sharp, is working himself into a sexual lather whispering to the pretty, buxom and slightly dotty Cissy all the things he'd like to do to her if she'd only agree to have sex with him. Cissy can't hear him, of course, because she's listening to an opera blasting into her headphones. Kim Brouwer

plays Cissy with wide eyes and a slightly vacant innocence leaving us unsure whether she's slipping into senility or just cleverly avoiding reality.

Over to the side, in the big comfy chair, Reginald (played with birdlike grace by Gary Potter) is trying to ignore Wilfred's recitation of the Kama-Sutra-For-Old-People while writing down pithy aphorisms about capital "A" Art for his autobiography. He's also steamed about that morning's breakfast.

We're not sure why. Into this group a new comer to the retirement home threatens to destroy the peace and quiet: Jean Horton, a certifiable Opera Celebrity and Reginald's ex-wife is taking up residence. Actor Mary Doig as The Diva has the regal and brittle presence required to play someone used to standing ovations and her character throws a sizable wrench into the plans our little group has made to celebrate the legendary opera composer Guiseppe Verdi's birthday.

Author Ronald Harwood has used the conventions of opera to highlight and comment on aging and fading faculties. In opera it's usual for the singer to repeat the same phrase over and over again. Same with many seniors. He's also used Verdi's quartet from Rigoletto Bella Figlia dell'amore as a key plot device: our four characters recorded one of the definitive versions 4 decades earlier and now, in their fading years, they're being asked to re create it at the retirement home celebration of Guiseppe Verdi (or "Joe Green" as they prefer to call him). This sets up the second act finale.

Set designer Kenneth Forsyth has created a soft and comfortable environment for the four actors to "rage against the night" and set decorator Lee Wakelin has sourced wonderful Opera posters and paraphernalia to bring it to life. The lighting (Ward McCance and Evan Souter) and sound (Victor Svenningson and Linda Cardie) are spot-on, especially the performance-within-a-performance at the end of the play.

Quartet has been called a "shameless" vehicle for ham actors but in this production it is also touching, funny, sad and a bit voyeuristic: you feel like you're sitting in the lobby of a retirement home watching how people who led a blessed life deal with being shunted aside.

Quartet plays at the Firehall Theatre until Oct. 7. For Tickets Call Victoria Hall Box Office.