reviews

# Cactus Flower @ The Pavilion Theatre

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Verdict: ⭐⭐⭐⭐½ (reviewed opening night 22 September)

*Cactus Flower* presented by Castle Hill Players at The Pavilion Theatre is every bit as entertaining as the 1969 film starring Goldie Hawn. Adapted from the broadway play written by Abe Burrows, the film was Hawn's first major film role that also won her an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. Hawn played the part of 21-year old Toni Simmons opposite her 50-something love interest played by Walter Matthau. The film was a huge commercial success of its time, but certainly not ahead of it, with flippant references to suicide, non-consensual kissing, open marriages, infidelity and more. The misogyny is ripe, with the 54-year old Ingrid Bergman playing a dowdy dental assistant secretly in love her douchey boss, who tells her she needs to "feminize herself" to make herself more attractive to the male clientele. Fortunately, like the spectacularly successful *Barbie* film, misogyny in *Cactus Flower* is capitalised through a pink bubblegum filter. The talented Hawn and Bergman also save the film from drowning in its own cheese.



With all of that 60s bias to contend with, director Stephen Snars does a marvellous job of selling the flimsy romantic plotline with perfect comedic timing delivered by all his actors. As an audience, we find ourselves laughing hysterically at every joke, no matter how "un-PC" it is. The outdated script may not be everyone's cup of tea, but this version of *Cactus Flower* blooms with inspired performances that are as memorable and charming as Hollywood royalty.




Daisy Alexis, a breath of fresh air in real life as she is on stage, plays the lead role of Toni Simmons. Alexis is cute as a button and adorable-as-pie, even when nagging and whining to her husband-to-be that she simply has to meet his first wife to "put things right". Her impish smiles convey mischievousness and a determination to have fun her way, such as re-gifting an incredibly expensive fur stole to Juliana's 'wife', as a show of empathy and offloading any guilt about being a 'homewrecker'. Juliana's wife is delighted to receive such an expensive gift, and the two women hit it off at a nightclub, enjoying the male attention they receive on their terms.

Blake Pasih as the caressing Dr Julian Winston is, dare we say, much easier on the eye than Walter Matthau ever was, and thankfully is a lot more age appropriate too. His performance displayed a good range from being self-assured and arrogant to becoming jealous and insecure, when his lies finally catch up with him and the women he is trying to manipulate get the upper hand.

Margareta Moir in the role of Stephanie, originally played by Bergman, also has a fantastic range, going from wallflower to MILF. Her dynamic and fiery exchanges with Julian after he has cajoled her into posing as his wife gives *Cactus* its prickly thorns, captivating the audience with every word and door slam landing on a powerful beat.

The other standout in the comedy farce is Lachlan Armstrong as Igor Sullivan, Toni's boyishly handsome neighbour who rescues her from a suicide attempt and from then on has an overly friendly relationship with her, much to the chagrin of Julian who always seems to catch him at Toni's apartment wearing nothing but a towel.

The set design as always is a standout at Pavilion Theatre, with impressive attention to detail. Stephen Snars and Paul Sztelma have gone above and beyond to recreate the 60s mood, vibe and settings, juxtaposing Toni's richly colourful studio apartment with Julian's sterile dental practice. The ottoman in the shape of a gold tooth is a nice touch, as is the record store where Toni works that rolls open like a nifty corner cupboard. The overall aesthetic is very eye catching and pleasing on the eye.

Also pleasing on the eye are the fabulous vibrant costumes by Annette Snars, complementing the vibrant background. A standout moment is when Stephanie waltzes on stage arm in arm with her South American admirer, dazzling head to toe in a blazing, shimmering ice-blue evening dress. It reminds of Princess Diana's cheeky 'up-yours' moment when she wore her 'revenge dress'.

It's these 'wow' moments that keeps the juice flowing in this madcap production, which could easily run out of steam, but never does.

*Cactus Flower* is playing at *The Pavilion Theatre* until 14 October 2023. For tickets and showtimes go to https://paviliontheatre.org.au/cactusflower/

Images: Chris Lundie



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