

Reviews

Minna von Barnhelm

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Greenwich Studio Theatre

30th September 1993 – 31st October 1993

Translated by Kenneth J. Northcott

Directed by Margarete Forsyth

Independent

27th October 1993

INDEPENDENT

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Sarah Hemming on

**MINNA von
BARNHELM**

Fringe and touring companies have done a lot over the last decade to expand British theatre-goers' familiarity with European classics. Latest to join them is Greenwich Studio Theatre, launching its new resident company with Lessing's 18th-century German comedy *Minna von Barnhelm*. It's a bold choice, and one that pays off.

Lessing offers us a neat moral comedy: at the end of the Seven Years' War, the wealthy Minna hunts out her beloved Prussian officer in a Berlin inn. But Tellheim, penniless and discharged, now considers himself unworthy of the match — and won't be persuaded otherwise. "Equality is always the strongest bond of love," he spouts, refusing the help of his friends. Minna has

to resort to female cunning to make him face the deeper meaning of his words.

The play shares some traits with our own, earlier, Restoration comedies — the quest for love, the social critique, the cheeky servants and spirited ladies who negotiate their way round social restrictions. But here serious moral issues underpin the process: Tellheim's weakness is too much honour, rather than too little, which allows Lessing to explore Minna's more progressive understanding of the virtue and to posit the notion of equality of the sexes.

Margarete Forsyth's polished, enjoyable production handles the tone of the comedy with great assurance, pays detailed attention to characterisation and conveys the sense of society in turmoil. There are strong performances all round, led by Sally Cassin's luminous Minna and Julian Forsyth's ramrod Tellheim, in a show that augurs well for the company's residency.

What's On

6th October 1993

Soldier of fortune

MINNA VON BARNHELM
Greenwich Studio

In his controversial writings of 1768 the German playwright Gotthold Lessing explained: "The burlesque only aims to provoke laughter, the tragi-comedy only to move; true comedy aims to do both." And his charming and profound comedy *Minna von Barnhelm*, written just the year before, proves he was capable of creating the true stuff.

Widely regarded as the first major comedy in the German language, it broke new ground by daring to poke fun at the bourgeoisie at the same time as taking them seriously. Now, naturally, some of its themes seem a tad dated, but many more are relevant today, making it an accessible and enjoyable play.

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And thanks to the new resident Greenwich Studio Theatre Company's enthusiastic production, we have here a little German gem.

The Seven Years' War between Prussia and Saxony has just ended, leaving righteous Prussian Major von Tellheim wrongfully accused of taking bribes from the Saxon government. Awaiting his discharge, he becomes a martyr to misfortune, refusing offers of much-needed money from desperate friends and believing himself to be unworthy of his heiress fiancée, Minna von Barnhelm, now that he is a social outcast. Meanwhile, the plucky heiress, all sparkling wit, bright intelligence and feminine finesse, has followed him to Prussia to take him back, determined to prove to him that their love is beyond such man-made social constraints.

The plot is simplicity itself: the complexities are in the personalities and their dealings with the strict social conduct of the time. And if you miss any such complexities, there is an informative programme to guide you. The cast is a strong team, with an impressively wide age range, unusual for fringe companies. All are engaging, noticeably Bernard Kay's Paul Werner and Donna Wilson's Franziska, and there is not a weak link in this rather delightful chain.

Margarete Forsyth's direction is slick and pacy, with some inspiring little touches - her elegantly simple set is neatly constructed throughout the play, an exact mirror of the plot, and the deft and witty choreography of each set change is a miniature masterpiece. Dramatic lighting and sound effects give a final professional touch to this lovely little piece and I defy you not to leave feeling good about life in general. (See Fringe)

MELISSA MICHAEL

Time Out

6th October 1993

'Minna von Barnhelm'

GREENWICH STUDIO

An obscure European comedy with sizable cast, stylish set, sharply incised direction, high production values: Greenwich Studio is under new management with a new resident company, and looks set to become (fingers crossed) south London's answer to The Gate. Quality of performances and sets have made a quantum leap, making this odd eighteenth-century play by German dramatist Lessing a real treat.

German aristocrat Minna (Sally Cassin) arrives at a Berlin inn and unknowingly gazumps out of his room the very officer she has come to woo, the now impoverished but honourable Major von Tellheim (Julian Forsyth). He has cast her aside, too proud to take advantage of

her money, or that of his friend, the gruff old soldier Werner (Bernard Kay, splendid). Minna and her delightfully pert maid Franziska (Donna Wilson) start plotting to outwit the Major's preposterous scruples, aided (and thwarted) by Tellheim's sharp but honest servant (excellent Eddie Marsan) and the unctuous landlord, Angus Deayton-lookalike Tim Swinton. And don't miss Stephane Cornicard's hysterical cameo as the skint, swindling French officer Riccaut de la Marliniere. By this time (1763) honour feels like an anachronism, and witty throwaway lines open out the drama and hint at political upheavals outside this little room. Meanwhile, inside, the first trumpet blast of sexual equality is sounded. It's a slight tale, and a rather static play, but directed with real charm and a delicate touch. A splendid opener.

Suzi Feay