

# Theatre Review: Boeing Boeing

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"Boeing Boeing" is a meretricious, cliché-ridden contraption without a shred of literary quality -- and it is absolutely irresistible, at least in Blackfriars' slam-bang production. I have seldom heard an audience enjoy itself so much as I did at this opening night, and I happily admit I also enjoyed every door slam, unlikely coincidence, double entendre, and pratfall that director John Haldoupis and the wonderful cast served up. And there is an evening full of them to enjoy.

The play itself is an early 60's artifact by the French playwright Marc Camoletti, whose specialty was (to borrow a term from the program) Boulevard comedy, or more precisely, "middlebrow sex farce." "Boeing Boeing" was *very* popular in France, running for 19 years in Paris and becoming the most-produced French play of the 20th century (take that, Jean Anouilh!). It was nearly as popular in London, and its ethos seems to have infiltrated innumerable "Britcoms" from the 60's and 70's.

If you've seen a "Carry On" movie or an episode of "'Allo 'Allo!" you know the style: silly, wackily plotted, heavy on sight gags and puns and slapstick, and full of characters who talk a lot about sex but never seem to actually have any. (This seems unusual for a French play, but never mind.) If not well done, "Boeing Boeing" is simply moldy; if it is well done, its sheer energy and silliness can leave you helpless with laughter. It is well done -- in fact I can't imagine it much better done -- at Blackfriars.

I deliberately chose the word "contraption" to describe this play: it is all elaborate set-up and delirious pay-off, almost a blueprint for actors. Bernard (Jake Purcell), an American lothario living in 1960 Paris, is seeing three luscious stewardesses: Gloria, an American who works for TWA (KaitMeleski); Gabriella, an Italian, from Air All'Italia (**Janine Mercandetti**); and Gretchen, a German, for Lufthansa (Brynn Kathryn Tyszka). They all embody old clichés about their nationalities: Gabriella is lusty, busty, and appassionate; Gretchen is a Valkyrie with some interesting leather items in her bag; and you can tell Gloria is American because she eats pancakes with ketchup.

Bernard keeps his ladies unaware of each other by keeping very close track of the international flight schedules (hence the title, if you were wondering). But of course increased aircraft speed and flight cancellations soon ruin his best-laid plans, and all three ladies eventually find themselves in his apartment. Also along for the ride are Bernard's school friend Robert (Jason Mincer) and -- maisoui -- his maid Berthe (Kerry Young).

There is not much more to say about the play. Just go, sit back, and watch all these actors

throw themselves into these parts as if their lives depended on it. Jake Purcell plays the player, and Jason Mincer the nerdy best friend, with tremendous skill and ease. They are wonderful, graceful physical comedians, and their performances are primers in how to do double-takes, pratfalls, pseudo-panic attacks, and all the other apparatus of slapstick. Even Purcell's eyebrows are funny.

The stewardesses present their amiable ethnic cliches with gusto. Meleski is a chirpy American with dismaying tastes in food (you can tell that a Frenchman wrote this play); **Mercandetti** makes Anna Magnani look like Liv Ullmann; and Tyszka does the "She-Wolf of the SS" thing hilariously. Their interplay with the two men reminded me of Ginger Rogers's remark about her partnership with Fred Astaire: they do everything the men do, only backwards and in high heels.

And then there is Kerry Young as the maid, unrecognizable in a straight, stringy black wig, glasses, and a permanent pout of perturbed domesticity, speaking with the funniest faux-French accent ever (she gives the word "anticipation" seven or eight syllables, I think). Almost none of her lines are jokes as such, but she can't even walk on stage without cracking up the audience.

As a comic ensemble, the cast of "Boeing Boeing" is as good as it gets. John Haldoupis's direction, or perhaps I should say choreography, is timed to the nanosecond, and his set design of a bachelor pad with no less than seven much-used doors (and a much-used sofa) is simple but all that is required. He also provides some nifty mod costumes, including mini-dresses that the ladies wear very nicely, and a silver-gray suit (with red shoes!) for Purcell that James Bond might envy.