

A moving performance in a bleak, cold, dark play

★★★ (out of four)

By Robert Crew

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If you like your theatre bleak, if your idea of a laugh is dipping into something light and frothy by Dostoevsky, then *Through the Leaves*, now at Tarragon Theatre's Extra Space, should be just your dish of hemlock.

Written by German playwright Franz Xaver Kroetz, the play is an unrelentingly gloomy look at the relationship between Martha, a butcher who specializes in dog food and tripe, and Otto, who quite frankly is a brutish, insensitive, chauvinist pig.

The play starts with caviar and ends in heartbreak. In between, Martha confides her thoughts to a diary as Otto attempts — not without some success — to assert his masculinity by trampling her into the dirt.

A plain-looking woman of 50, she offers him love, sex and money. In return, Otto offers little but abuse, has “other irons in the fire” and disappears on periodic benders. He is jealous of her dog, accusing her of “loving” it more than him and he's furious when her business begins to flourish.

And although he virtually moves in with her and later takes a job in her butcher's shop, Otto has strictly defined, totally sexist ideas of what is proper for a man in his position. He insists, for example, on paying for tickets to a ball, because that's what “gentlemen” do.

It is, in short, a pretty awful relationship, but Maria Vaccratsis's Martha is utterly convincing as a woman who will go to extremes to please her lover while managing to maintain a small core of integrity and independence. Quiet, centred and detailed, Vaccratsis's work is simply wonderful, and left alone and lonely at the end, she is very moving.

Nicholas Campbell has the less enviable task of playing an utter slob, one whom it is impossible to warm to in any shape or form. One wonders what any woman could possibly see in him — and this is obviously the playwright's intent — but there is one other human being who sees traces of love and charm beneath the animal exterior.

The set, (an interestingly quirky arrangement), costumes and lighting are by John Thompson, and director Philip Riccio moves his actors through the piece with quiet, understated authority and a strong sense of its fluctuating rhythms.

The show is produced by The Company Theatre, who seem attracted to the dark nooks and pessimistic corners of the theatrical canon, and this one is no exception. It's chilly stuff — strong meat indeed.