

Hudson & Halls: Live!

Directed by Tom Vavasour

Elmwood Players, Elmwood Auditorium, Aikmans Road, Thursday 15 July

Reviewed by **Sophie Elizabeth Ricketts** for @Backstage Christchurch - Theatre Reviews

Hudson and Halls, the real NZ personalities, were known for being flamboyant, loose lipped, and carefree in the kitchen during their ten years on our TV screens. This was long before Masterchef or My Kitchen Rules dominated prime time viewing, and at a time when scripted comedy was king. The laughs and energy they delivered were based on their natural chemistry together, and the sometimes disastrous cooking results which played out, unscripted, before the nation. Their success and fame is all the more impressive when it is remembered that this was years before the homosexual law reform came to pass in the mid 80's. They were in the closet, but the door was wide open and they were still warmly welcomed into homes around the country via satellite.

Hudson and Halls, the comedic play, was commissioned by Silo theatre and first performed in 2015. Written by Kip Chapman with Todd Emerson and Sophie Roberts, it was subsequently performed at the Court Theatre as part of the Christchurch Arts Festival in 2017. Given that was only four years ago it is hard not to compare that professional production with Elmwood's current efforts, but I encourage anyone who already saw the former to come with an open mind and an open heart to the latter.

So much of the action in the play must be impeccably timed based around the progress of the food - which they are actually cooking! Hats off to the production team who managed to achieve a lot with this functional 80's kitchen set, and particular mention needs to go to Carolyn Hogden who is listed in the programme as "consultant chef/properties", I would venture to say that she has probably had a great deal resting on her shoulders in bringing this production to life. Small, but striking, touches abound throughout the kitschy kitchen right down to the selection of appliances and these draw some of the deepest laughs and heartiest sighs. We all remember having our own versions of that electric knife, herb cutter, or kitchen whiz. The flash and dazzle of the 80's hedonism and futuristic view are all contained here.

And the food. Everything with butter, everything with salt, and for God's sake don't skimp on the wine! While we watch these two men bristle, cajole, and antagonise each other most of us can't help but wish they were pouring us a drink each time

they top up their own. One lady in the front row was lucky enough to receive one! It is a sense of controlled chaos they are striving for and, mostly, achieve. At times there was a little too much control evident - the best moments in the play are those which appear really fresh and bubble up as a reaction to something which has just happened. It is my hope that as the run progresses there will be more of this “freshness” in every performance and that their natural rhythm with the material becomes smoother.

It is a fine balance walking the line between being true to the essence of the real Hudson and Halls, while not appearing like a caricature. Raoul Neave and Michael Adams did an impressive job of striving for this balance. In particular, Michael’s portrayal of David Halls’ manic energy was fun to see harnessed; and as Peter Hudson, Raoul Neave brought a terrific sensitivity. My favourite moment of the entire play was at the end when Peter is dedicating his Christmas toast to David. Rounding out the small cast were Elizabeth Woods as the peppy floor manager, Ngaire Watkins, and Frank Mars as the long suffering and mostly invisible techie, Mr. Lynch.

This is an iconic slice of Kiwi history and manages to hit the bulls eye on the nostalgia factor. The thoughtful touches with the props and set create the right television studio atmosphere and I think this is perhaps one of the best theatre spaces available to perform this show - the choice to only utilise the front half of the performance space and section off the rest with a black curtain creates a terrific sense of intimacy, and having the audience welcomed and briefed by Ngaire was a seamless way to start the show.

By the time we reached the finale the entire theatre smelled like sautéed onions, and we were grinning from ear to ear. A good combination. I applaud Elmwood players for adding a second piece of NZ theatre into their production schedule this year (following “Daughters of Heaven” a few months ago), and in particular enjoyed seeing a show with a smaller cast. This show is as fun and sweet as a champagne cocktail, and just as heart-warming as a turkey dinner at Christmas.