

Killer Boobs by Tim Hambleton

Canterbury Repertory Theatre

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Elmwood Auditorium

Reviewed by **Phoebe Biddle** for **Backstage Christchurch - Theatre Reviews**

This review contains some light spoilers

I didn't quite know what to expect when I first heard the title of this play. "Killer Boobs" put me in mind of something like Austin Powers, or maybe a concert by someone like Madonna or Katy Perry. Instead, I got to enjoy a heartwarming story of five women with breast cancer finding solace in each other during their monthly support group meetings.

All five ladies in the "Thanks for the Mammaries" support group have completely different histories, personalities, and styles. While a little contentious at first and unsure of one another, we get to witness their friendships blossom. Killer Boobs is more than a story about breast cancer. Each character has their own private and personal struggle with other aspects of their lives, and the support group, whether intentional or not, helps them through these struggles, too. Louise (Amanda Shields), the posh, rich lady that everyone has trouble connecting with at first, turns out to be being abused by her husband at home. Becs (Bethany Read), a young lady in the prime of life, has to come to terms with the fact she may not be able to have children after going through chemotherapy. Kath (Donna Bilas), a rambunctious and fiesty lady, is finally able to talk about her husband's death, a death she has been pretending has not happened for the last five years as a coping mechanism. Gina (Pene Maddock), a Maori lady with a history of less-than-legal adventures, finds herself able to embrace her Maori identity and her whanau where she has felt disconnected from them for years. Jenny (Amy Evans), the lady running the support group, is able to enjoy the friendships that would not have happened without her, and is the instigating voice of change as the ladies fight for funding of the latest breast cancer treatment in New Zealand. Each character has their own stories and, at first, seem to have little to nothing in common with one another. But their two mutual interests, as breast cancer fighters and as champions for the funding of Trimazerole, lead them to friends that they never would have had otherwise.

This is one of those rare plays where I don't think I will enjoy it as much if I ever saw it again, only because I felt that the actors fit the characters so well that I couldn't possibly picture anyone else playing them. It was as if they weren't acting, like I was watching something real, a documentary of some kind on the stage. The actors who played the five ladies, as well as the sole male actor playing the CEO of Pharmac, Richard (Steve Millar), brought the play to life in a way I feel may never be done again.

I was unsure at first. The acting and the speech seemed a little over the top and camp but, in hindsight, I think it added to the charm of the play. There were some occasions where the actors had possibly forgotten their lines and would talk over the top of one another and interrupt each other by accident. For me, this didn't detract from the performance as it made it feel even more real, in my mind. Who hasn't interrupted or talked over someone at some point? I would like to give a special shout out to Pene Maddock who played Gina, though. Pene was so effortless on the stage, performing their lines as if they weren't pre-determined but made up on the spot. What's more, they were so unhinged and funny, I was cracking up with almost every line!

In fact, the script, written by Tim Hambleton, is full of fantastic jokes and boob puns, not least the name of the support group itself. An entire scene is full of them where the ladies unintentionally make Pharmac CEO, Richard, extremely uncomfortable around them as he comes to their support group to explain why they won't be funding Trimazerole. It is hilarious and had the audience in stitches! At one point the person behind me was laughing so long and so hard I wondered if they were okay!

I can't fault the set, lighting, staging, or any of the technical aspects of the play. Everyone did a great job, both on stage and behind it. A word for the wise, though, at this particular venue, any noises backstage can be heard quite clearly by the audience. There was some mumbled conversations and other noises that were a bit distracting at times — something to bear in mind.

I've seen several plays by Repertory now. In fact, when Backstage get invited along, I'm one of the first to put my hand up to review, because I know it will be a wicked good time. I had high hopes, and every single one of them was met.

It's such an important subject to talk about. Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in New Zealand and, if caught early, is also one of the most survivable. On a personal note, my grandmother died last year after a long battle with breast cancer, going into remission several times, but the cancer eventually metastasised to a battle she couldn't win. For women like my grandmother, I think this play suggests something hopeful. Cancer is a terrible journey that can feel so isolating, but you don't have to go through it all alone. And, who knows, maybe the next best drug is just around the corner? Even if it's not, one of the key messages from this play comes through loud and clear — you don't have to go through it alone.

Breast cancer is very survivable if caught early enough. So I implore you, both ladies and gentlemen (yes, you too), check your bumps for lumps. It just might save your life.

For support with a breast cancer diagnosis, please visit the Breast Cancer Foundation NZ website at <https://www.breastcancerfoundation.org.nz>, or the Breast Cancer Support NZ website at <https://www.breastcancersupport.org.nz/> for help and advice.